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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE CLOWN-MOTIF IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S PLAY  
WAITING FOR GODOT

by

Ekaterini Logotheti

A THESIS

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The undersigned certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled The clown-motif in Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot, submitted by Ekaterini Logotheti in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the twentieth-century interest in the clown and the extent to which Waiting for Godot is built around the clown-figure. Chapter One traces clown-figures in painting, music, the motion picture and advertisements, and examines the character given to them by various artists in an attempt to express personal feelings and artistic creeds as well as the spirit of the times. Chapter Two discusses the clown in association with the twentieth-century concept of absurdity which favors a tragi-comic vision of life and is responsible, as a result, for the preponderance of tragic-farce in modern drama and analogous modes of art. Chapter Three gives an account of the critics' and reviewers' opinions of Waiting for Godot, with regard to the play's use of clown-figures and vaudeville techniques. Finally, Chapter Four discusses the ties which link Beckett's characters in Waiting for Godot with the clown-figures and the significance of the writer's choice and treatment of them.





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## Chapter One

### (i)

In 1890 Seurat exhibited a picture, Le Cirque. Both the subject and the manner were characteristic of the interests of the period. Le Cirque belongs by rights to the twentieth century which, according to Shattuck, "was born, yelling, in 1885."<sup>1</sup> The subject had already known a popularity which was to grow in the following years. Strolling players, acrobats and jugglers, harlequins and clowns caught the imagination of a host of painters: Cézanne, Daumier, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Renoir, Derain, Forain, Rouault, Chagall, Dufy, Picasso. The fascination with these figures may well have sprung out of the revived interest in the commedia dell'arte and the popularity of all kinds of shows. A widespread movement for developing in the soul of people a taste for the arts came into existence at about this time. Along with this development went a scheme for the formation of a Popular Theatre, a scheme which created endless discussions and debates.

Claude Debussy commenting on the movement in general wrote:

If it is really a good thing to provide performances for the people, there should be a definite idea as to the character of such performances. Perhaps it would be best to revive the ancient games of the Roman imperial circus.<sup>2</sup>

Circus performances were, however, already popular and much frequented by artists.

Three permanent circuses and a new Hippodrome fringed Montmartre along the boulevards. The clown, the horse, and the acrobat here earned their place in modern art: the Degas ballet dancer became the Toulouse-Lautrec cabaret entertainer, and then became the Picasso Harlequin. The





team of clowns, Footit and Chocolat, developed the first comic-stooge act (known as clown et auguste). Groc and Antonet, the American Emmet Kelly, and the Fratellini brothers all achieved fame in Paris before the turn of the century.<sup>3</sup>

The artists were reluctant to create an art for the people. But when they felt concessions at the expense of their art were required, they nevertheless allowed their work to be influenced by popular art. Seurat's Le Cirque was inspired by circus posters and so was the curtain Picasso painted for Parade in 1917. The truth is that, notwithstanding the distance between the artists and their public, many of the artistic works of the time contributed generously in keeping alive the effervescent spirits that had inspired them.

Le Cirque was exhibited in 1890 unfinished, a peculiarity that caused some sensation. Seurat's failure to finish his picture is characteristic of the state of mind not only of one man, but perhaps of a whole era marked by a boisterous extravagance, in love with the eccentric and the notorious, frivolous, yet, at the same time, harboring deep-seated anxieties. Moreover, it is paradoxically consistent with the spirit of one of the main performers of the circus: the clown, the failing man.

Le Cirque is a delightful picture. Everything in it, the ethereal equestrienne gracefully poised on a white horse, the impish clown turning somersaults in the air, the humourously assertive ringmaster, each and all are a feast to the eyes. Seurat painted the picture in the spirit of a man who enjoyed the act. Here again he was expressing feelings that the whole stage-struck era shared with him.



"For the Banquet Years, (1885-1918) all Paris was a stage,"<sup>4</sup> wrote Roger Shattuck but he might as well have said a circus ring. Indeed, the terms he uses to describe the Banquet Years could amply justify the name. In his vivid account of the era Shattuck talks of a certain Madame Aubernon who conducted her salon like a "lion tamer" and treated her guests like "performing animals" ; he writes of Satie that he was "part mascot, part primitive, part jester, part sage"; and of Apollinaire he says that he was "the ringmaster of the arts"; he quotes André Gide's description of Jarry as a plaster-faced "circus clown," and Madame Rachilde's account of how he made his literary debut "like a wild animal entering the ring"; he cites a letter from Rousseau to his beloved Leonie where he complains, "You said that if I was no use to you, at least I served you as your buffoon."<sup>5</sup> Buffoonery seems, indeed, to have been standard behaviour among the artists.

The Banquet Years brought on stage a set of artists whose waggishness was not intended to serve as an interlude of comic relief. Their lives matched their art in a fashion that does not even now seem natural. . . . They made fools of themselves and broached the limits of art. It is doubtful that they could have done so by clinging to their sanity.<sup>6</sup>

The revived interest in the commedia dell'arte made characters like Harlequin and Pierrot extremely popular with artists. Their flexible and elusive nature was found suitable to express an astonishing gamut of feelings. Moreover, they lent themselves easily to subjective and semi-allegorical interpretations.





The treatment of Harlequin and Pierrot varied according to the idiosyncrasy of the individual artist. More than a century after Seurat, Raoul Dufy painted a series of Harlequins in much the same spirit in which Seurat had painted Le Cirque. The work of both artists reflects their interest in the spectacular and the pleasure they took in it. Their performers are gay, delightful creatures without a wrinkle of trouble. Unlike them Derain's Pierrot and Harlequin (1924) are sad and pathetic, resigned to their destiny while at the same time they are singing a song on their guitar. Derain has obviously tried to catch the contrast between the gaiety expected in their profession and the sadness imposed by fate upon them.

They too have realized that acceptance may prove the only possible course of action; they stand uneasily, and Harlequin himself seems to reflect, half curiously, half whimsically, upon the emptiness of pleasure. In their inability to proceed, to gain more than there is to gain, one is reminded perhaps of the hopelessness that certain writers- a Beckett for one- have suggested in recent years.<sup>7</sup>

With Rouault's clowns we feel that acceptance is not the only possible course of action. These grotesque and distorted figures carry with them the violence of social protest. Rouault chose the clown along with other outcasts of society to express his indictment of social vices and his pessimism at moral decay. He loved him and identified himself with him; he made the clown a symbol of his own revolt against his times. But like the artist Rouault's clown is a submissive rebel.

Grotesqueness often lends something brutal and very earthy to Rouault's clowns, but this brutality is an outward rather than



an inner reflection. Like the head of Christ he painted in 1905 it reflects man's cruelty to man. The clowns in Rouault's art are never a long way from his portrayals of Christ. Rouault paints them with the same loving fervor that he paints his religious themes. After his revolt against academicism, Rouault felt the imperative need "to express his religious convictions not in pictures of angels, but in an indictment of vice and evil; and to rediscover the truths of Christianity not in principles of faith, but in the lives of clowns and unfortunates."<sup>8</sup> This was Rouault's gesture of solidarity with the religious revival in France which, at the turn of the century, greatly influenced social conditions and moral standards. For Rouault the ideal way of life was that of the clown.

Strolling players over all the highways of Ile-de-France, drifting from North to South, from East to West, fun loving, peace-making conquerors who go your way in winter toward the sun, the green plain in spring on toward the ocean sea, I have always envied you, I a recluse tilling the pictorial soil as the peasant tills his field, now toward Spain you go by way of Navarre, now Flanders-all at once making off for the Straits of Gibraltar, moving forward at less than 300 an hour-good old shuffling Rosinante, far from the Venturers of the Celestial Highways; from the consortiums of the Mad Match King, whose matches catch on indistinctly at both ends or not at all; from the garglings and pettifogging classicists, or the latest agents of clandestine armaments for World Peace; near the Cape of Good Hope or the Bay of Departed Souls.<sup>9</sup>

As a child Rouault used the big tent of the Shooting Star Circus as an escape from the hardships of life. Gradually, however, the circus folk ceased to be simply amusing. Beneath the gay mask Rouault discovered, like Derain, truth in violent contrast with appearances. He did not hesitate to call some of these traditionally





funny entertainers "tragic clowns." In doing so he was merely pointing out the complexities of this absurd and contradictory figure. It is interesting to note perhaps that Louis Vauxcelles' criticism of Rouault's art contains a felicitous anticipation of Gregor Samsa, a Kafka hero whom recent criticism has often called a clown.

This is the art of a visionary, a satirist who tears his victims apart, who suffers and moans. The depths of his backgrounds are lit up by magnificent tones. The tortured smiles of his figures freeze into grimaces. For Rouault the humanity of modern times is a swarming mass of insects tormented with epileptic contortions.<sup>10</sup>

Early in his career Picasso was attracted to the vagrant world of the circus and the characters of the commedia dell'arte. Like everything else he did Picasso's saltimbanques harlequins and clowns reflect a greater range of feeling than the motley crowd painted by any one individual artist. They bear resemblances now to Seurat's and Dufy's graceful performers, now to the resigned figures of Derain; often they are closely related to the social outcasts of Rouault.

Picasso's 'Circus Period' following on the heels of his 'Blue Period' still retains some of the cold, sublimated and pity-compelling colors of its predecessor. Yet, there is a change in the mood.

The circus folk are no longer solitary in their poverty, they appear surrounded by their companions. The pale emaciated forms of starving cripples are replaced by figures full of the grace of adolescence and often curiously androgynous in their physique.<sup>11</sup>

Picasso gave the social outcasts the dignity of the artist. Figures like the young girl balancing on a ball with



consummate grace express both the performer's and the painter's delight in the former's skill (Circus Family). A similar mood is evident in the curtain Picasso painted for the ballet Parade, inspired by the iconography of the commedia dell'arte. The Seated Harlequin on the other hand has a completely different character. The head tilting sadly over the lean childlike body, the old haggard look of the face, the eyes staring out on a vacant world are all reminiscent of Derain's Harlequins. The traditional hat, an uncanny reminder of Napoleon's tricorne, gives the weary figure the air of a defeated conqueror. The king and the clown are, however, more clearly identified in four drawings, all variations on the theme of the clown who is also a king and the king who is no more than a clown, a subject celebrated by Shakespeare in King Lear. One of these drawings called 'Le Roi Dagobert', after the early medieval king so popular in French folk songs, is of special interest because Apollinaire seems to have identified himself with Dagobert. This is obvious from a humorous book-plate which Picasso designed for him and in which a clown-king seems to have borrowed the poet's features. Rouault, too, had talked of the strolling players as "conquerors." But he gave the clown-king he painted in 1923 a totally different aspect. The picture, "a souvenir perhaps of Ubu Roi,"<sup>12</sup> has an uncanny resemblance to Karaghioz, a shadow hero of oriental origin with whom Ubu Roi shares a formidable and threatening coarseness.

Like Rouault, Picasso will sometimes give Harlequin his own features as in L'Harlequin au verre painted in 1905. Like Rouault,





too, he will daringly give him a halo of saintliness. Anthony Blunt and Phoebe Pool made the following comment on the Family of the Harlequin.

The likeness of the composition to a Holy Family cannot be purely fortuitous, particularly since the addition of a monkey to such subjects is known in the sixteenth century, as, for instance, in the etching by Dürer.<sup>13</sup>

Picasso's Harlequin has a prismatic existence upon the canvas.

Like his creator he is intelligent, spiritual, sensual.

The preference that Picasso shows, particularly in early life, for Harlequin suggests that analogies must exist between him and this legendary character. Picasso's Harlequin is not the elegant flirtatious entertainer loved by Watteau; nor Cézanne's proud youth in fancy dress, nor is he a buffoon. Though he may be a jester he speaks the truth, and though he may be wearing a disguise we detect him by his mercurial nature and his elusive ways. It would be legitimate to interpret this Harlequin, with his diamond coat of many colours, as the power to juggle with everything while remaining evasive and irresponsible. He is a thief who gratuitously steals up unperceived to take his prize, to prove himself capable of doing so and to test his luck. He can change his personality and slip into another's skin. His game is ambitious; it is a test of strength with the established order.<sup>14</sup>

(ii)

It was not only the painters among the artists who were attracted to the circus folk and the commedia dell'arte characters. Musicians shared the interest in spite of the fact that, generally speaking, these comics are extra-musical figures, too solidly made of flesh and bone to be successfully incorporated in such an abstract medium as music. They nevertheless make their appearance in operas, ballets, or songs.

In 1895 Richard Strauss completed his tone poem Till Eulenspiegel. Till, an one time historical character, is considered something of a national clown. In Strauss' symphonic poem he





appears as an arch-mocker of mankind, impudent, rebellious and supremely devil-may-care. Nothing is sacred to him, not even religion. He is determined to have his own way in this world and when crossed he becomes furiously revengeful. Nevertheless

Strauss seems to be saying that Till was, for all his malicious practical jokes, at heart a good and lovable fellow, and to be recalling with a wistful smile all the joie de vivre which, misdirected, led Till to offend society to such an extent as to cause so untimely an end to his career.<sup>15</sup>

In 1915 Frederico Busoni composed an opera, Arlecchino.  
Arlecchino seems to have a lot in common with Till Eulenspiegel.

His dress is motley and his nature bold, he loves, he fights, and laughs, he flies and sings and is like one possessed with the devil of truth.<sup>16</sup>

Busoni's hero like Strauss' was, however, well meaning. In a letter to a friend the composer wrote:

I have been reproached for Arlecchino because it is considered scornful and inhuman: nevertheless, this creation arose from an impulse completely opposed to such feelings—namely, out of sympathy for men who make life harder for one another than it should and might be, through egoism, through inveterate prejudices, and through convention when it is opposed to feeling! Therefore in Arlecchino one comes (and the aim is attained) only to a painful laugh. . . .

Arlecchino is less than a challenge and more than a jest . . . .  
In the end it stands almost "beyond Good and Evil."<sup>17</sup>

It is clear enough from the above quotation that moral considerations went into the making of Arlecchino. Busoni himself admitted that "After that of the Magic Flute . . . it [Arlecchino's] is the most moral libretto there is."<sup>18</sup> Ethical considerations also lay at the foundations of Till Eulenspiegel. It is not, of course, surprising that the clown should be considered a suitable



vehicle for the expression of such feelings. The clowns of Derain, Rouault and Picasso often probe what are essentially moral questions. This probing is well within the clown's traditional role; the moralist is, in fact, one of his many acts.

Busoni said that his Arlecchino was inspired from the excellent performance of an Italian actor who was trying to re-introduce the commedia dell'arte, and the Roman Marionette theatre.

The marionette theatre attracted and influenced a number of artists. In Petroushka, the ballet for which Stravinsky composed the music the main characters are puppets. During Carnival time an old Showman presents his puppets, Petroushka, the Ballarina and the Blackamoor, to the public and there charms them to life. Of the three Petroushka suffers most from his human emotions. In Petroushka we come across some of the traditional traits of the clown. He is grotesquely ugly and jealously amorous; destined to make other people laugh, he is himself unhappy; he is in love with the Ballarina but she prefers the Blackamoor to him. His life, one long disappointment, ends in disaster. He is killed by the Blackamoor. While, however, the showman apologetically shows the sawdust limbs of the puppet to the crowd, the ghost of the real Petroushka is seen over the top of the booth. There is something in Petroushka that endures time, something almost immortal, his soul. This is his source of life and the support on which his defiant moods rest.





Petroushka is the tragi-comic Pierrot of the Russian fair. Pierrot developed out of the character of Pulcinella, a cunning and lusty hero of the commedia dell'arte who figures in another ballet for which Stravinsky composed the music: The Four Pulcinellos. According to the old Neapolitan manuscript chosen as the basis of the ballet, Pulcinello is no longer the jilted lover; instead all the girls are in love with him. The young men to whom the girls are betrothed are, naturally, inflamed with jealousy and plot to kill him but Pulcinella outwits them all. The Four Pulcinellos ends happily with the marriage of all the main characters. Like many other artists of his generation Stravinsky has shown an interest for the circus. This is evident in the Circus Music he composed for the Barnum and Bailey circus.

In 1912 Schoenberg completed his melodrama Pierrot Lunaire. music was composed to accompany a poem by the Belgian poet Albert Giraud. Giraud's verses have a morbid attraction. "They contain certain sado-masochistic turns, and moods of malaise and perversity."<sup>19</sup> Though Schoenberg himself said that he followed them in a very impressionistic manner, the music picks up and intensifies this feeling of shrill hysteria and horrifying depression. In a way the melodrama was wonderfully prophetic of the horror of the war that was already approaching. In the realm of music Pierrot Lunaire was a significant work for in it Schoenberg was re-moulding old patterns and trying his hand at new ones. As Alfred Kerr wrote in his periodical Pan, "Pierrot Lunaire . . . appears to me not as the end of music but as the beginning of a new stage in listening."<sup>20</sup>



The music that Eric Satie composed for Parade five years later was greeted in much the same spirit. Apollinaire's introduction to the programme with the title "Parade et l'esprit nouveau" stressed the significance of Satie's score ~~which~~ was "decorated with parts for typewriters, sirens, airplane propellers, Morse tickers and lottery wheels."<sup>21</sup>

More than any single event at that time, it set the tone for the ~~postwar years~~ - the tone defined by Jarry, promoted by the Rousseau banquet, and now offered to a wider public. It was a serious-humorous exploitation of popular elements in art, a turning to jazz and music hall and to all the paraphernalia of modern life, not in a spirit of realism, but with a sense of exhilaration in the absurd.<sup>21</sup>

Parade was performed in 1917 at the générale for the benefit of the War Fund on the same programme with Les Sylphides and Petroushka. The sets and costumes were designed by Picasso. The script was written by a young poet, Jean Cocteau, who had begun by setting down the Larousse definition of a parade: "a comic act put on at the entrance of a traveling theatre to attract a crowd."

The cast for Parade included seven characters, three managers and four dancers. One of the four dancers was a conjuror who according to Cocteau's direction for his miming: "takes an egg out of his pig tail, eats it, finds it again on the end of his shoe, spits out fire, burns himself, stamps on the sparks, etc." Another was a little girl who "runs a race, rides a bicycle, quivers like the early movies, imitates Charlie Chaplin, chases a thief with a revolver, boxes, dances a ragtime, goes to sleep,



gets shipwrecked, rolls on the grass on an April morning, takes a Kodak, etc." The other two dancers were acrobats, "simpleton, agile and poor . . . clothed in the melancholy of a Sunday evening circus."<sup>22</sup> All these characters made desperate attempts to excite the curiosity of an imaginary crowd and induce them to enter their theatre where the real show was to go on. But their efforts were all fruitless; the crowd remained to the end indifferent.

The real audience of Parade, however, responded violently to the ballet. "The Parisian intelligentsia were incensed, believing that they had been made the victim of a farce produced to make them look ridiculous for having sat through it."<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, and in spite of the audience's reactions, Apollinaire was right in pronouncing Parade "the starting point of a series of manifestations . . . which should completely alter both arts and manners."<sup>24</sup>

The triumph of Pierrot Lunaire and Parade was a victory of the avant garde. The choice of the clown and the circus, as suitable vehicles to express the artists' convictions on art and life, once more echoed and anticipated tendencies that have continued up to the present day. Though the actual clown-figure seems to have been eclipsed in modern painting and music, his 'spirit' is present in the comedy of forms, colors and sounds prevalent in compositions in both arts.





## (iii)

A number of the actors who gave life to the early film comedy belonged to the motley world that had inspired artists like Seurat, Dufy, Rouault, Picasso, Satie, Stravinsky. Mack Sennet, the father of American screen comedy,

took his comics out of music halls, burlesque, vaudeville, circuses and limbo, and through them he tapped in on that great pipeline of horsing and miming which runs back unbroken through the fairs of the Middle Ages at least to ancient Greece.<sup>25</sup>

Charlie Chaplin had worked in the music halls in England before he came to America and eventually to the screen. Harry Langton and Buster Keaton came from the vaudeville act; after the advent of the talkies the latter would sometimes clown in a circus. There can be little doubt that their comic genius was influenced by their work in these mediums.

On the silent screen miming was more or less an expedient, but at the hands of artists like Chaplin, Langton, Keaton and Harold Lloyd it developed into a high form of art. Miming became the means of providing laughter to such an extent that the gradual dwindling of its volume in the motion picture house has been often attributed to the onset of speech with the invention of the talkie.

The early comedies depended a lot on improvisation. Mack Sennet did not have much faith in scenarios. Instead he trusted his actors with a few primary ideas which they were free to develop according to their gifts. He felt



. . . sure the better stuff would turn up while they were shooting in the heat of the action. This put quite a load on the prop man; he had the most improbable apparatus on hand-bombs, trick telephones, what not - to implement whatever idea might suddenly turn up. All kinds of things did - and were recklessly used. Once a low-comedy auto got out of control and killed the cameraman, but he was not visible in the shot, which was thrilling and undamaged; the audience never knew the difference.

Sennet used to hire a "wild man" to sit in on his gag conferences, whose sole job was to think up "wildies." Usually he was an all but brainless, speechless man, scarcely able to communicate his ideas; but he had a totally uninhibited imagination. He might say nothing for an hour; then he'd mutter "You take . . ." and all the relatively rational others would shut up and wait. "You take this cloud . . ." he would get out sketching vague shapes in the air. Often he would get no further; but thanks to some kind of thought-transference, saner men would take this cloud and make something out of it. This wild man seems in fact to have functioned as the subconscious mind, the source of all creative energy.<sup>26</sup>

Due perhaps to associations with the music hall, the vaudeville and the circus, the early film comedies triumphed in plain slapstick. It has been pointed out that slapstick comedy approximated the mechanical. Buster Keaton certainly made generous use of mechanical gags. Of the four major comedians of the period, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langton, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, it was the latter who brought pure physical comedy to its greatest heights and kept sentiment almost entirely out of his work.

Keaton was a wonderfully resourceful inventor of mechanistic gags; . . . as he ran afoul of locomotives, steamships, prefabricated and over-electrified houses, he put himself through some of the hardest and cleverest punishment ever designed for laughs.<sup>27</sup>

Harry Langton, unlike Keaton and other comedians who used more or less elaborate physical comedy, "showed how little of that one might use and still be a great silent-screen comedian."<sup>28</sup> Langton





came on the screen with a child-like innocence. He looked very much like an outsized baby who has outgrown his clothes. The character he impersonated had something as deeply and movingly human as the tramp created by Charlie Chaplin. Of all the comedians, however, it was Chaplin who

worked most deeply and most shrewdly within a realization of what a human being is, and is up against. The Tramp is as centrally representative of humanity, as many-sided and as mysterious, as Hamlet, and it seems unlikely that any dancer or actor can ever have excelled him in eloquence, variety or poignancy of motion.<sup>29</sup>

Charlie, the tramp that Chaplin created, is also a clown. In his various roles in the past the clown has already been king and magician. Charlie aspires to even higher honours. According to Robert Payne he becomes a god.

In the first century of our era Plutarch speaks of a voice crying over the midnight sea: "Great Pan is dead"; but everyone knew the oracle was false. The mocking spirit of the woodland remained, and is still heard today.<sup>30</sup>

In the twentieth century Charlie has become the Great Pan whose name, Robert Payne thinks, signifies everything because, according to one story, he delighted in everything. According to another story he was everyone because all the gods had fathered him. As "representative of humanity," Charlie, the clown-tramp, comes close to being a twentieth-century Everyman.

Gods are powerful and the clown, as portrayed by Chaplin, can do anything he likes. He can assume a thousand shapes, he can weave spells, he can perform miracles, he can create; out of nothing he can create a world and there live strong in his secret knowledge and wisdom, and immune from the world's evils.



Charlie, like Pan, is a lover of fun, dance and music:

. . . l'homme moyen sensuel raised to the pitch of perfection, desiring above all that the world should provide him with sleep, rest, food and amusement, bewildered by machines, and still more bewildered by himself, by the fact that a man is a man. He is the least dangerous of the great archetypes, the most human, the most incorrigibly concerned with things as they are. His characteristics are a terrible enthusiasm and an odd mania for laughing at the world's incongruities....<sup>31</sup>

Laughter is Charlie's irresistible weapon with which he fights his way into the world. Laughter can be, at times, enchanting as it echoes his heart's delight, his pure love of life. But laughter can also be terrible expressing contempt, cruelty and sheer madness. Describing a scene from The Vagabond in which Charlie aims a sudden kick in the stomach of one of the pursuing gypsies, Robert Payne comments:

. . . it is one of the most extraordinary pieces of brutality ever committed by the clown, inevitable, effortless and terrifying, for the hag crumples like a doll stuffed with horsehair, and almost you hear Charlie's wild demented laughter, the laughter of pure triumph and freedom as he rides off with the girl.<sup>32</sup>

At his best, Charlie keeps sentimentality at bay. He knows the world and takes it for what it is. He becomes the world. He is not merely trampled-on innocence; he is also the danger lurking behind the corner. In his long actual career he has represented, among other things, a murderer, a pimp, a panderer, a seducer, a criminal. It is as if by being evil he has wanted to destroy evil.

Charlie's prismatic existence deliberately reflects the complexities of the world he lives in, his bewilderment its





incomprehensibility. He is a compound of opposites. In him the ecstatic enjoyment of life is mated with incurable grief.

He is no comedian or tragedian: he sees the world as comedy and tragedy at once, instantaneously both.

The great passages in the tragic comedy of Charlie belong to poetry, and should be regarded as poetry.<sup>33</sup>

The comedy in Charlie springs from his glorious sense of life, his joie de vivre; the tragedy from his keen awareness of death. As Chaplin once said,

The clown is so close to death that only a knife-edge separates him from it, and sometimes he goes over the border, but he always returns again. So in a way he is a spirit - not real. And because he is always returning that gives us comfort. We know he cannot die, and that's the best thing about him. . . .<sup>34</sup>

It is not given to every traveller to return from the twilight kingdom. Like Lazarus back from the dead, Charlie has brought along with him as spoil that treasure

knowledge . . . .

Increased beyond the fleshly faculty . . . .<sup>35</sup>

It is a wisdom destined to make him a madman and a stranger, a clown perhaps, or so the twentieth century would think, "yet no fool."<sup>35</sup>

Charlie, however, it may be argued, has been on the retreat for a number of years now. The bantam tramp is more and more rarely seen on the screen. He is becoming a curiosity to be unearthed in old film libraries. Granted there are articles and books written about him, studies that are a tribute to his genius. But Charlie, the great clown, must above all be seen and Chaplin's films are already in a deplorable condition. Unless something is done about them, the day will soon come when Charlie will no





longer be available even at old film libraries. This is perhaps what induced Payne to write:

Clowns - even clowns - die. . . . At last, at long last, the great god Pan was dead, and no one who ever saw it would forget his death, just as no one who ever saw him living would forget his life.<sup>36</sup>

Such ~~hyperbolic~~ tribute is in itself significant. True, it is not the first time that the death or apparent retirement of a great clown has been commented on in such ominous terms. When Deburau and Grimaldi died there were people who believed that all clowning was dead. Then came Paul Legrand, Séverin, Dan Leno, Chaplin, the "great Charlie," who combined the wild, animal spirits of Grimaldi, usurper of Harlequin, with the stoic desperation of Deburau, the most famous Pierrot, the character which substituted in France the Italian Pedrolino of the commedia dell'arte. Keeping in mind, however, what Chaplin said, that the clown cannot die, one wonders why Payne had to come to that conclusion. Granted that Charlie may be dead, the spirit of the clown is not. There have already been instances of its reincarnation on the screen and on the stage, though none of the clowns that have appeared since Charlie seem to have achieved the world wide fame and appeal of the pale tramp with the bushy eyebrows, the absurd mustache, the battered derby hat, the jaunty bamboo cane and the flapping boots. Two of them are of special interest and ought perhaps to be mentioned though they do not belong to the world of the motion picture.

Marcel Marceau's 'Bip' made his first appearance on a French stage in 1947. Marceau, perhaps the 'greatest mime of our era



and Chaplin both claim that the clowns they have created have descended from the Greek and Roman mimes, the medieval pantomimes, the commedia dell'arte, the music hall and variety show, and the circus. Like Charlie, the tramp, 'Bip' is everyman and everything. He is a burlesque and poetic figure who identifies himself not only with people but with nature and the elements around him as well.

The recent tour of the Moscow circus has brought international fame to another clown, Popov. Popov's clowning follows patterns that differ from those of his Western predecessors and contemporaries. Popov has effected a striking change in the image of the clown by mocking failure and asserting his right to success. He does not merely bully, he outwits everyone in the ring, and if he feigns failure on the tightrope it is only for a better display of his acrobatic skill. Popov's triumph, reflecting probably the pragmatic spirit prevalent in the Soviet Union, is of a practical nature. Charlie's on the other hand is often spiritual. Popov provokes laughter by the cleverness with which he overcomes obstacles. We laugh with Charlie even when adversities overwhelm him because his joy in defeat is so irresistible. With Charlie laughter is not so much the response to victory as victory itself.

In Russia the circus is one of the most popular entertainments. In the Western world the motion picture and the T.V. seem to have gained ground at its expense. But its appeal is by no means gone. A recent issue of Show presented Robert Gadney's





United Circus with the following note.

Spring means circus time in the English countryside. Traveling tent shows like Robert Gadney's United Circus meander from town to town, stopping to pitch a tent wherever the children will come, clutching their shillings, to see the world grow modestly magical through the agency of greasepaint, sawdust and imagination. Joe Gadney's "rags and sticks" circus has an atmosphere of never-never land, missing from the bigger, more ornate and organized outfits. To his performers, circus life is not a job. Although the show moves regularly on its day-to-day route - sometimes only half a mile down the road through the English Midlands - the people in it manage to preserve a sense of freedom. Despite the hard work, the unsettled, nomadic life, the circus brings a feeling of adventure and play which outsiders have long since lost.<sup>37</sup>

Charlie himself did not fail to join the circus, the "never-never land" that had always been his own.

Those pale-faced clowns who wander round the ring with putty noses and disconsolate expressions, dressed in a jester's panoply or in rags, their noses lighting up as they try to distract the attention of the audience from the daring acrobats on the high trapeze, were after all his brothers.<sup>38</sup>

Charlie appeared in The Circus in 1928. His career on the screen had begun in 1914. Shortly afterwards the fermenting celebration of clown figures in a variety of mediums simultaneously ceased. Allowing for isolated works such as Bernard Buffet's series of pictures Le Cirque, painted after the second World War, painters and musicians seem to have abandoned the actual clown-figure as an object of their art, but one can often detect acts of clowning in the art itself. The spirit of the clown, if not the clown himself, is present in the work of Klee and Miro', for instance, and a good deal of the jazz music. The experimental work of Norman McLaren provides a combined illustration of



clowning painting and music in the medium of the motion picture.

A good example of this is his film Begone Dull Care a lively interpretation in fluid lines and colour of jazz music. McLaren treats things in much the same way that Grimaldi and Grock did.

In his amusing autobiography Grock wrote:

Ever since I can remember, all kinds of inanimate objects have had a way of looking at me reproachfully and whispering to me in unguarded moment: "We've been waiting for you . . . at last you've come . . . take us now, and turn us into something different." . . . To use onions for nothing but frying and making into sauce . . . how humdrum . . . how unimaginative!"<sup>39</sup>

Dealing with abstract lines and sounds McLaren derives his comic effects not from the mechanization of the human but rather from the lifelike qualities with which he endows his inanimate objects.

But the motion picture, still faithful to the human figure on the whole, is faithful to the clown figure as well. In very recent years Jacques Tati has created a more sophisticated variation of the clown. Monsieur Hulot, helpless in the midst of a highly mechanical civilization, has undoubtedly strong associations with Charlie. Tati's Mon Oncle and Chaplin's Modern Times both reflect the horror of a machine trapped humanity and the insanity of man who will allow himself to be mastered by his own invention. Both pictures are satires carrying a violent indictment on a civilization that has foolishly relinquished all other props but the machine.

Besides Tati who, like Chaplin, writes, directs and impersonates the main character in his movies, Bergman and Fellini have given the clown-figure and the circus an eminent place in their work. But before coming to them mention should perhaps be





made of a picture shot during the war and released in 1945:

Les Enfants du Paradis. In this picture Jacques Prévert and Marcel Carné collaborated in the resurrection of the great clown Jean Gaspard Baptiste Deburau.

Deburau re-invented Pierrot around 1835 on the stage of the Funambules Theatre. His Pierrot, to whom Charlie is closely related, became famous for his sang froid, his desperate gaiety and his complex mood. He alternated between gentleness and fury, delicacy and insolence, extreme joy and extreme grief, and seemed to live in the midst of danger with a deathlike quality hanging for ever around him. Deburau had the power to transmit the most subtle emotions to his audience. He played for the people and was of the people.

The beauty of Deburau's acting lay, then, in his nonchalance, his simple joy in defeat, his sudden rages, the little scamperings of the feet which announced his momentary triumphs. There was a prodigious grace about him. Jules Janin, who wrote his biography, spoke of him as 'an actor without words, without passion and almost without countenance; one who says everything, expresses everything, mocks everything; capable of playing without uttering a word, all the comedies of Molière; a man informed of all the follies of his day, and who reproduces them to the life.' Baudelaire described him as 'pale as the moon, mysterious as silence, supple and mute as the serpent, straight and tall as the gallows.' Even while he was alive he belonged to legend.<sup>40</sup>

Jean Louis Barrault gave a luminous interpretation of Deburau in Marcel Carné's production. James Agee describing his "breath taking" miming wrote: "The Chaplinesque mime (Jean Louis Barrault) is the only depiction of an artist, on the screen, which has fully convinced me of the genius he was supposed to have."<sup>41</sup> In 1946 Barrault, having set himself the task of inventing the great clown,





presented Deburau once more to the public at his theatre in the pantomime Baptiste in which he held the role of Pierrot and Marcel Marceau that of Harlequin.

Strolling players, actors, acrobats, clowns, magicians, play an important part in the work of Ingmar Bergman. His imagination is sensitive to their artistic and human plight. Bergman said once in an interview that The Naked Night was inspired by some circus wagons "rolling along in the early dawn on a spring winter day somewhere in the neighborhood of Gimo."<sup>42</sup> The picture is about a traveling circus and its people mercilessly exposed to the abuses of nature, the scorn of society, the insulting authority of the police. Outside the ring the performers are stripped naked of illusions. They know that the circus is a world "of rush and push and misery and lice and disease."<sup>43</sup> So often they are preyed upon by the desire to escape and the fear of betrayal. There is, of course, beauty in the boldness of the tight-rope act; and there is more freedom on the road than within empty walls. But The Naked Night insists above all on the humiliation that is forced upon the circus artists as a daily truth on which they must live and survive.

The humiliation theme, which is the central one in the film, and perhaps the nucleus of B's artistic philosophy, is intimately bound up with the feeling of physical exhaustion, the smell of sweat and stable, dampness, cold and cheap perfume that permeates the story. The circus is dilapidated, everything stinks.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike the humiliation that accompanies the circus artists in The Naked Night, a brightness of grace seems to hover around



Jof, the juggler, and his family in The Seventh Seal. Jof, his wife Mia and their son Mikael, are grouped together in a manner reminiscent of Picasso's Harlequin and Family; Bergman, too, seems to be suggesting that a parallel be drawn between them and the Holy Family, possibly fleeing from death in Egypt.

Jof is a juggler. He is also a poet, a man endowed with extraordinary imagination, a visionary blessed with seeing the "unseen miracles."<sup>45</sup> Like those knights of faith Kirkegaard speaks of, he is a "simple person who arrived at faith without difficulty, without ever having to cross the abysses, the man with no chink in his armour, the most enviable of the saints."<sup>46</sup>

Jof's little troupe has been asked to perform at the saint's feast in Elsinore. When Jof asks what part has been assigned to him, Skat, the actor, laughs in his face: "You are such a damn fool, so you're going to be the Soul of Man."<sup>47</sup> In this way the Soul of Man is mocked and laughed at. As far as the world is concerned Jof is "a damn fool," an "idiot," "a half-wit."<sup>48</sup> This is an easy way to dismiss a being who makes men embarrassingly uneasy. "People don't like someone who has too many ideas and fantasies,"<sup>49</sup> observes Mia. In a way Jof is like Shaw's Saint Joan. He, however, escapes death through the Knight's one meaningful act, the grace of love.

In 1958 Bergman made The Magician, a film that combines humiliation with triumph. On the brink of defeat, hunted, scorned and laughed at, the mesmerizer Albert Emanuel Vogler is sought after to receive the highest of honours: an invitation to





perform before His Majesty the King. In this way the humiliated charlatan assumes again the stature of a true magician.

Throughout the film there is a deliberate ambiguity as to the real power of Vogler. At the moment of defeat he humbly professes that his fantastic performance in the attic during an autopsy scene was "a cheap trick."<sup>50</sup> His wife, Manda, describes their activities as a "fraud."

Manda: Pretense, false promises, and double bottoms.  
Miserable, rotten lies throughout. We are  
the most ridiculous scoundrels you can find.  
Vergerus: Is your husband of the same opinion?  
Manda: He doesn't speak.  
Vergerus: Is that true?  
Manda: Nothing is true!<sup>51</sup>

This last ambivalent statement could well serve as a refutation of all that Manda has said. Later, talking of the past with her husband, she refers to their "cheap tricks" as "miracles"<sup>52</sup> in which they themselves fully believed. Though disillusioned Manda could believe again, if-

Manda: Yes, of course, feel at ease. We can prove our inability as many times as you like.  
Vergerus: It seems to me that you regret this fact.  
(Manda is silent.) As if you wished for something else. (Manda doesn't answer.  
Vergerus laughs.) But miracles don't happen.  
It's always the apparatus and the spiel which have to do the work.  
Manda: If just once. . . .  
Vergerus: That's what they all say. If just once. For the faithless, but above all for the faithful.  
If just once.  
Manda: If just once - that's true.<sup>53</sup>

The invitation of the King is possibly just that "once."

When Vogler marches out to the Royal Palace he is no longer destitute and crushed; his faith in himself and in his art has been restored.



Moreover his passing has left its marks on all those who experienced it. Even Vergerus who thinks he can ascertain that the unexplainable does not exist is shaken and has to admit the limits of knowledge.

It has been said that The Magician could be compared to a Passion Play; and that Vogler might be Christ. "By his presence he makes everybody strangely disturbed, he exercises an irresistible fascination on his environment, whether it reacts with hatred or with love."<sup>54</sup> The final reversal of the situation has received the following interpretation.

When the King's Son, the One sent forth, has been as deeply humiliated as is possible, there is a turn in the tide. Then comes, says the Gnostic, the Letter, the Royal Letter from the world outside of our reality, and conveys the King's will: That his son shall be rehabilitated and enter into the glory of his Father.<sup>55</sup>

This may be an extreme opinion but it reflects a tendency in the twentieth century to associate the modern hero with Christ who "becomes more and more a companion-victim, a fellow-self on the margins of violence."<sup>56</sup>

Federico Fellini said in an interview that he thinks of Bergman as a "school chum."

I feel a certain congeniality with Ingmar Bergman and Akira Kurosawa. It is enough for me to see something of theirs to realize that the air is the same, a mixture of equestrian circus and drama. Here is the film man with the clown's hat, the prophet's beard, the whip and the little star .. from the end of the magician's wand; a true and proper showman. So, if I were to meet Bergman or Kurosawa, I would feel as though I were with a school chum.<sup>57</sup>

Fellini ran away and joined the circus of Pierino, a clown who had caught his imagination, when he was only nine.



Discovered by a friend of his father three days afterwards he was forced to return home. Later he joined a music-hall company and toured around Italy. These experiences are often reflected in his work. The main characters of La Strada for instance belong to the world of the circus and the strolling players. Gelsomina, the eldest daughter of a poverty-stricken family is sold to Zambano, a traveling strong-man. Zambano is more of a beast than a man. Gelsomina is more of a child than a woman. Against his brutality is pitted her innocence; against the bullying master the defenceless slave. Though Gelsomina revolts she cannot escape her fate. Zambano grows on her and gradually she herself becomes indispensable to him. In the end the master is conquered; the little half-wit clown proves herself a heart tamer. La Strada features another clown, (Il Matto) to whom Gelsomina is instinctively attracted. Il Matto, endowed with the fool's insight into truth, opens Gelsomina's eyes to her role near Zambano whose contemptible act and ways he jeers at and thus brings about his own ruin.

The clown-figure keeps recurring in the work of Fellini appearing in various roles as a child, a mesmerizer, a film director. By far, however, the most interesting clown yet to appear in a Fellini picture is the one impersonated by Giulietta Masina, the Gelsomina of La Strada and the little prostitute of The Nights of Kabiria. Masina has been compared to the child-like Harry Langton. She has also been called a female Charlie. She has, indeed, Charlie's innate sunniness and humanity, his unaccountable fits of temper, his terrible enthusiasm and disconsolate sadness.





Like him she can "wear adversity like a bouquet" and ask the audience to rejoice with her even in a moment of the greatest misery. The description of The Tramp's end could do well to describe the closing scene of The Nights of Kabiria.

When we last see him [Charlie] he is walking sorrowfully down an empty road with the bundle on his shoulder, and the sorrow is unbearable until he suddenly takes it into his head to do a little dance, square his shoulders and go dancing to the horizon.<sup>58</sup>

Before closing this brief survey tracing clown-figures in various arts, mention should perhaps be made of the appearance of clowns in another medium: advertisements. The interest lies not so much in the figures themselves as in their association with what they are advertising. We see, for instance, clowns, whose only means of transportation has traditionally been an old pair of boots, recommending Lufthansa German Airlines and Esso gasoline; or appearing in an ad for a Magnavox T.V. set; or advertising Camel cigarettes, of all men this inveterate cigarette butt smoker! It would seem indeed that the clown was climbing the social scale and gaining status and prestige! In any case, the fact remains that this version of the clown-figure, however vulgarized, adds to the evidence showing the popularity that such figures enjoy.

The reasons for the continual presence of the clown-figure in the twentieth-century imagination would take us into a consideration of the nature of the modern mind, and of the technological situation in which modern man finds himself. This is an itinerary which lies outside the scope of this essay. In



the next chapter, however, we shall have to consider the relation between the clown and the cult of absurdity which is such a marked feature of modern thought and art.





## Chapter Two

The clown is best known as an entertainer, a comic character. Here is, of course, only one of his roles. The clown has a complex personality and an absurd capacity to multiply himself. He is a paradox in whom opposites and irreconcilables meet. He can be naive and kind, cunning and cruel, meek and rebellious, beggar and king, all at one and the same time. The artists of the twentieth century have been well aware of his potentialities. Moreover, they have seen in the clown a congenial nature, a being who hinted at their deepest concerns. They envied him the freedom with which he discarded conventions, broke rules, criticized and mocked, created and destroyed. The clown embodied many of their aspirations and was therefore a suitable vehicle for expressing them. Their interest was caught by and focused on the multiplicity of his masks. The comic mask was one of them but it was no longer stressed and projected. The other masks, the clown as visionary, poet, artist, rebel, have been of equal importance. The clown's nature was supple enough to express anything and everything, and in fact, this comic man par excellence could at times embody a tragic concept as Rouault showed in his Tragic Clowns, who, nevertheless though tragic remain clowns, but who have certain comic traits as well.

This shift of focus in the comic character of the clown reflects a parallel shift of focus in contemporary theories of the comic. Comedy is being reconsidered and its functions



reappraised within what might be called a context of absurdity. From all quarters writers inform us of the absurdity of the human condition in an age of unreason.

It is impossible even in a book-length study to do justice to all the facets of what is in essence an attempt on the part of man to revise received notions of what human reason is. The new unreason is essentially a revision of reason as it had been thought of since Descartes and Newton. And because the comic relies on man's sense of what is reasonable, this twentieth-century view of reason and what is rational affects modern man's view of the comic.

The twentieth century very early parts company with Meredith's and Bergson's theories of the comic. Publishing in 1956 Meredith's essay on Comedy (1877) and Bergson's on Laughter (1900) Wylie Sypher added an Appendix: The Meanings of Comedy in which he pointed out the inadequacy of the two theories. Meredith and Bergson considered absurdities as social defects and directed laughter against them as a corrective. Our new appreciation of the comic on the other hand, according to Sypher, accepts the absurd as inherent in the human comedy.

We have . . . been forced to admit that the absurd is more than ever inherent in human existence: that is, the irrational, the inexplicable, the surprising, the nonsensical—in other words, the comic.<sup>1</sup>

As a comic character the clown grows beyond the limits of Meredith's and Bergson's theories. He is no longer merely the butt against which our laughter is directed; the "wooden dummy"



is seen more and more as a flesh and blood being of our own kin. Indeed, he holds the mirror up not only to the artist but, often enough, to the whole of humanity as well. In this climate of absurdity, writes Sypher, the modern hero "is aware that he is J. Alfred Prufrock, or Osric, an attendant lord - "Almost, at times, the Fool:"<sup>2</sup> The world of the fool and, eventually, the clown is, nevertheless, as rich as life.

The province of the Fool is the whole circuit of life and death, laughter and tears, wisdom and ignorance. The fool is comic man. He is no mechanical figure. His gestures have daemonic power, and he carries his scepter by right of ancient rule. We fear him as god; we laugh at him as clown. All the ambiguities and ambivalences of comic action pivot on this archetypal hero of many guises. The fool wears motley- the particolor of human nature- and quickly changes one mask for another, putting on indifferently and recklessly the shifting features of man, playing with gusto more roles than are suitable to the tragic hero. The fool at last proves to be the clown; and the clown is He Who Gets Slapped- and "is none the worse for slapping." He is resilient with a vitality lacking to a tragic hero, who must accept his misfortune and his responsibility with a stoic face, with a steadier logic than the absurd logic of comedy.<sup>3</sup>

This figure of the fool reminds us, at certain points, of Camus' absurd man. His "province", on the other hand, seems to coincide with the world which the dramatists of the absurd have chosen to depict. According to Martin Esslin this world has four distinct features, each one a link with the world of the clown. They are namely-

abstract scenic effects as they are familiar in the circus or revue, in the work of jugglers, acrobats, bullfighters, or mimes.

Clowning, fooling and mad scenes.

Verbal nonsense.

The literature of dream and fantasy, which often has a strong allegorical component.<sup>4</sup>





It is certainly a sign of the peculiar adaptability of the clown that he can fit into worlds which differ from each other, like Bergson's world of comedy, Camus' world of the absurd, or the world which the Theatre of the Absurd treats. Indeed, he seems to mark certain points of contact between them. The pre-occupation with reason and the feeling of absurdity is, for instance, common to all of them, but its objects are seen from different angles and as a result receive different interpretations. Differences inevitably affect the personality of the clown, but when he has twisted himself through them he emerges each time richer, stronger and even more adaptable.

Bergson's theories of the comic really lie outside the twentieth-century cult of the absurd. In Bergson's context absurdity means "a very special inversion of common sense."<sup>5</sup> Common sense on the other hand is "the moving continuity of our attention to life."<sup>6</sup> The absurd then is an abuse of the principles of life. Within the human and more particularly the social sphere, Bergson considered such abuses as laughable. His theory of the comic really rests on the distinction he made between the living and the mechanical.

A continual change of aspect, the irreversibility of the **order of phenomena**, the perfect individuality of a perfectly self-contained series: such, then, are the outward characteristics - whether real or apparent is of little moment - which distinguish the living from the merely mechanical. Let us take the counterpart of each of these: we shall obtain three processes which might be called repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series. Now, it is easy to see that these are also the methods of light comedy, and that no others are possible.<sup>7</sup>



According to this distinction it is obvious that the comic character, as Bergson conceived him, is nothing more than a puppet, an automaton. Bergson defined the comic character as the "unconscious" person, in other words, the person who lacks common sense, "the mobility of the intelligence conforming exactly to the mobility of things,"<sup>8</sup> and cannot, therefore, adapt himself to the changing situations of life.

Deep-rooted in the comic, there is always a tendency, we said, to take the line of least resistance, generally that of habit. The comic character no longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which he is a member. He slackens in the attention that is due to life. He more or less resembles the absentminded.<sup>9</sup>

Camus is not so much an innovator of the cult of absurdity, as a very persuasive pleader for reason old-style. He has recourse to the cult of the absurd in order to support a view of reason which is becoming more and more indefensible. Camus, too, locates the absurd in this ossification of habit, that at times "secretes the inhuman".

Men, too, secrete the inhuman. At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. This discomfort in the face of man's inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this "nausea," as a writer of today calls it, is also the absurd.<sup>10</sup>

As reason had been optimistic, so the new revision of reason usually sees the absurd with a tragic dimension. It needs hardly be mentioned that the "nausea" Camus writes of is not comic, at least not in Bergson's sense. According





to Camus the feeling of absurdity springs from the awareness of a dense world and the inadequacy of reason to penetrate it. Neither the world nor man are absurd in themselves. The absurd means a confrontation and finally a divorce of the two.

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.<sup>11</sup>

The feeling of absurdity precludes the comfort of peace. The struggle of reason, however ineffectual, to conquer even a fragment of this world, is never slackened. In the midst of this irreducible universe the absurd man remains in a state of permanent revolution concentrating all his efforts in keeping it alive, registering every moment of it to consciousness. Against the Bergsonian rigidity Camus counterpoises the pliability of the absurd man whose ambition is to expand himself through quantity of experience and variety of living.

Interestingly enough, though Bergson associates absurdity with the comic character, the "unconscious man", Camus thinks of the absurd man as both the man of consciousness and a potential tragic hero. Talking of the myth of Sisyphus Camus observed:

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when he becomes conscious.<sup>12</sup>



The clown, as we have seen, can stress, at wish, both interpretations of the absurd; he uses rigidity in his act to provoke laughter. Bergson used in fact circus clowns to illustrate this rigidity and support a comic law according to which "We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing."<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless the clown's mercurial nature is hardly compatible with the rigidity Bergson attributed to him. Far from submitting to the routine of the machine the clown has often protested against it. Chaplin and Tati preserve the pliability of human beings in a machine-cluttered world. They are absurd and comic exactly because they refuse to conform to the mechanical.

Logic in the context of the cult of the absurd takes upon itself a responsibility for the sort of coherence we find in dreams. The Bergsonian comic character who inverts common sense acts according to a peculiar logic, the logic we observe in dreams, which we may laugh at and think of as absurd. Reality in the case of the dreamer is sacrificed to imagination which proceeds to the pursuit of a fixed idea wearing blinders and refusing to take account of or adjust itself to anything else on the way. The pursuit has neither rhyme nor reason; it is a disorderly rambling about of the dreamer's mind which is affected by sleep. As a result the dreamer seems to live in a world of illusions which clashing with reality could produce laughter in some one observing him. Bergson has offered Don Quixote attacking the windmills as an illustration of the comic possibilities of a somnambulist acting in a dream. The conditions of the dream are





favorable to nonsense and a sort of madness with obvious comic potentialities.

It might be instructive to compare with dreams certain comic scenes in which one of the characters systematically repeats in a nonsensical fashion what another character whispers in his ear. If you fall asleep with people talking round you, you sometimes find that what they say gradually becomes devoid of meaning, that the sounds get distorted, as it were, and recombine in a haphazard fashion to form in your mind the strangest of meanings, and that you are reproducing between yourself and the different speakers the scene between Petit-Jean and The Prompter.<sup>14</sup>

But, above all, there is a special madness that is peculiar to dreams. There are certain special contradictions so natural to the imagination of the dreamer, and so absurd to the reason of a man wide-awake, that it would be impossible to give a full and correct idea of their nature to anyone who had not experienced them.<sup>15</sup>

Bergson regarded the logic of the dream as a laughable absurdity. The dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd, who consider the dream not as a concealment but as a revelation of reality, have used the absurd logic of the dream, its peculiar nonsensical madness and also its childlike inconsequence to plumb inner realities. The dream is no longer associated with the unconscious comic person; it has become a delving into the sub-conscious in order to discover the universal collective significance of private obsessions. To be sure it is still a part of comedy. The form of the dream as described by Strindberg in his introduction to a Dream Play, a forerunner of the Theatre of the Absurd, has strong resemblances to the world of the circus where "anything can happen" because "we expect the unusual."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand the dream with its chaotic atmosphere, its free associations and lack of connectives can also stand as a nightmarish metaphor for life itself.





In this dream play, as in his former dream play To Damascus, the author has sought to reproduce the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Anything can happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On a slight groundwork of reality, imagination spins and weaves new patterns made up of memories, experiences, unfettered fancies, absurdities, and improvisations. The characters are split, double and multiply; they evaporate, crystallize, scatter, and converge. But a single consciousness holds sway over them all - that of the dreamer. For him there are no secrets, no incongruities, no scruples and no law. . . .<sup>17</sup>

Through its theory of the relation between dreams and creativity, surrealism has contributed to the developing cult of the absurd a vivid apprehension of the creative process; this is part of the twentieth-century attempt to change reason from a critical to a creative instrument. The logic of the dream, however, serves slightly different purposes for Bergson on one hand and the surrealists on the other. Bergson attributed it to the comic character and by doing so turned it into a defect to be cured by laughter. Strindberg in The Dream Play made it an instrument of the imagination which sees beneath the surfaces and beyond the limits of things; so did the surrealists after him. The dream, the nonsensical, madness and childishness were used as means to transcend the world of appearances and discover the essences of life. The dream and various dream-like elements of waking life assisted in a mystical experience during which the artist was able to come closer to spiritual reality. Though their comic potentialities were not ruled out, the expected response was no longer a corrective laughter but a sense of joy arising out of the liberation of anxieties an audience experiences with the unfolding of dream fantasies. "It is certainly significant", writes Martin



Esslin,

that today, when the need to be rational in "serious, adult life" has become greater than ever, literature and the theatre are giving room in increasing measure to that liberation through nonsense which the stiff bourgeois world of Vienna before the first World War would not admit in any guise.<sup>18</sup>

The literature of verbal nonsense expresses more than mere playfulness. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language, it batters at the enclosing walls of the human condition.

Verbal nonsense is in the truest sense a metaphysical endeavor, a striving to enlarge and to transcend the limits of the material universe and its logic.<sup>19</sup>

Breton claimed that the Surrealist method of automatic writing awakens powers of prophecy and clairvoyance. Surrealism indeed asserted above all man's creative powers. But these are faculties which the clown has always possessed, as the evidence of tradition shows, as well as that of twentieth-century art.

Studies like Enid Welsford's show that the new absurdist unreason, however much an innovation, has affinities with and indeed has been nourished by a curiosity about the role of reason in the pre-Cartesian past. Enid Welsford has pointed out associations which link the court jester with the court poet, the saint and madman with the wise fool. Madness has not always been a contemptible infirmity but at times also a means to supernatural power. The madman in such cases is an awe inspiring lunatic who has become the mouthpiece of a spirit and is capable of seeing the unseen. Such madmen have often been venerated as saints. The Mohammedan belief in the connection between insanity, clairvoyance and sainthood, is exemplified in the story of Buhlul-al-Madjun. The name means Buhlul the Madman or the 'Djinn-inspired.' There are many legends about Buhlul in which he figures as a madman, an object





of ridicule, a wise fool, a versifier, a shrewd debater and finally a man whose prayers are to be desired. Buhlul had frequent encounters with the caliph Haroun-ar-Rashid whom he was free to criticize and rebuke but whom he was also able to make laugh. There is indeed evidence that Buhlul may have been both an inspired poet-saint and at the same time a court-fool.

A story parallel to Buhlul's is the one that treats Comgan Mac-da-Cherda "a man of an extraordinary nature who was at times deprived altogether of the use of reason, but at other times had lucid intervals when he showed signs of such sagacity, that his wise replies were accepted as oracles."<sup>20</sup> Mac-da-Cherda, evidently a historical personage, was not only an inspired madman but also an accomplished poet as well as a buffoon. His official title of Arch-poet and Fool of all Ireland makes him a clear example of the identification of the inspired poet and the court-fool.

The stories of Buhlul and Mac-da-Cherda belong to tradition. Clown-figures, however, continue to be treated along similar lines in our own times. Vogler in The Magician displays powers which, if not supernatural, at least puzzle and defeat man's reasons. Jof in The Seventh Seal is another instance of the combination of the fool-poet-visionary. He illustrates brilliantly the power of an imagination such as the surrealists believed in.

At the very heart of the cult of the absurd is the belief that the poet is clown and that the clown is visionary and poet. Bergson, too, talks of the potential of human imagination but he distinguishes between the artistic imagination which has revelatory



powers and the imagination of the comic character which continually deludes him blocking him off and isolating him from the rest of society. Thus in Bergson's context the comic character is deprived of qualities which as a clown he has been known to enjoy. For the clown is a poet as well, an artist who is, as Welsford put it, at once his own creator and creation. Indeed he would seem to be at home not only in Bergson's definition of the comic character but of the poet as well.

Poetic imagination is but a fuller view of reality. If the characters created by a poet give us the impression of life, it is because they are the poet himself, - a multiplication or division of the poet, - the poet plumbing the depths of his own nature in so powerful an effort of inner observation, that he lays hold of the potential in the real, and takes up what nature has left as a mere outline or sketch in his soul in order to make of it a finished work of art.<sup>21</sup>

The poetic imagination, Bergson believed, gave the artist an intuitive understanding of life that went deeper than reason alone would allow. He reserved, however, the term absurd for the sort of imagination which misleads a character into the false reasoning that belongs to dreams and requires the cure of laughter. Both Bergson and the Surrealists believed in a privileged vision which could reveal the essence of the universe and reach out to the infinite. But whereas in the former's mind that could be effected by a vital spring upwards and outwards, an élan vital, the latter had a downward and inward vision of reality trusting their subconscious for that.

To date there have been no really satisfactory studies of the theatre of the absurd because in fact its critics have been





embarrassed by social, technological and intellectual upheaval which must be accounted for before the new theatre could be dealt with adequately. On the whole it is the surrealists' trend of thought that the dramatists of the absurd seem to have followed sharing with them their faith in the power of dreams and fantasy to depict the reality of the human condition. Like the surrealists they too have plumbed the subconscious, that lockerroom of forbidding feelings such as horror, violence, anguish, pain, viciousness, an overall criminal madness, in an effort to tear illusions down. Their plays reflect what glimpse of reality they have caught, and the vision, as Martin Esslin puts it, is anything but comforting.

In the Theatre of the Absurd, the spectator is confronted with the madness of the human condition, is enabled to see his situation in all its grimness and despair, and this, in stripping him of illusions or vaguely felt fears and anxieties, enables him to face it consciously, rather than feel it vaguely below the surface of euphemisms and optimistic illusions. And this, in turn, results in the liberating effect of anxieties overcome by being formulated. This is the nature of all the gallows humor and humour noir of world literature, of which the Theatre of the Absurd is the latest example. It is the unease caused by the presence of illusions that are obviously out of tune with reality that is dissolved and discharged through liberating laughter at the recognition of the fundamental absurdity of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

This grimness and despair, the feeling of absurdity recognized and accepted by the absurd dramatists and integrated into the new sense of the comic is incompatible with the Bergsonian comic character. As Sypher has remarked "Bergson's analysis of laughter is incomplete, which may explain why he thinks comedy works only from the 'outside'. Comedy may, in fact, not bring laughter





at all."<sup>23</sup> And laughter, Sypher continues quoting Coleridge, may be, after all, the expression of anguish and horror as well as joy. The clown provokes this sort of laughter as well as the laughter Bergson has ascribed to the comic. It has been said that the most wonderful thing about Deburau was "the strange mingling of extreme joy and extreme sadness which streamed from his face,"<sup>24</sup> and which he was able to share with his audience.

Bergson's views of the comic are useful today chiefly as a reminder of how radically our conception of the comic has changed. The rigidity of the Bergsonian comic character is a result of his neglect to look around and more especially within himself. He has forgone the effort of intellectual tension that is so characteristic of the absurd man in Camus' context. He is, in fact, completely unaware of the absurdity of the human condition as understood by Camus and this constitutes exactly his own absurdity. Bergson deliberately described his comic character as skin-deep for he considered all forms of consciousness as incompatible with the concept of the comic.

However interested a dramatist may be in the comic features of human nature, he will hardly go, I imagine, to the extent of trying to discover his own. Besides, he would not find them, for we are never ridiculous except in some point that remains hidden from our own consciousness. It is on others, then, that such operation must perforce be practised. But it will, for this reason, assume a character of generality that it cannot have when we apply it to ourselves. Settling on the surface, it will not be more than skin-deep, dealing with persons at the point at which they come into contact and become capable of resembling one another. It will go no further. Even if it could, it would not desire to do so, for it would have nothing to gain in the process. To penetrate too far into the personality, to couple the outer effect with causes that are too deep-seated, would mean to endanger, and in the end to sacrifice all that was laughable in the effect.<sup>25</sup>



According to the new perspective of comedy, however, it is at the junction of irreconcilables that the comic springs forth. Here is the clown's territory, too. He lives in the midst of irreconcilables well aware of their absurdity.

"The man who withdraws into himself," wrote Bergson, "is liable to ridicule, because the comic is made up of this very withdrawal. This accounts for the comic being so frequently dependent on the manners or ideas, or, to put it bluntly, on the prejudices, of a society."<sup>26</sup> The Bergsonian comic character is a social separatist and is laughed at in order to be brought back to the social herd.. He receives this mockery in passive ignorance and since he does not study himself or others he is, naturally, not able to mock back. We know, however, that one of the most consistent roles of the clown has been the mask of the mocker. Till Eulenspiegel is a notorious arch-mocker and so is Charlie, the tramp.

The clown is not simply a mocker, he is, or rather has been for censorship is now subjecting him to its rule, a licensed mocker. One of the reasons he has been able to hold that role is that he exists on the fringes of society. It is true that what Bergson called unsociability of the comic character, may be partly responsible for the laughter he raises. But in the case of the clown the laughter does not presume to improve or correct. The clown is more often than not outside morality, beyond good and evil.

By describing the laughter as a corrective Bergson assumed a specific code of moral values which society embodied. Everything in his theory of the comic depends on the assumption that society





is built on that common sense which the comic character lacks.

Bergson himself, however, has pointed out the weaknesses of that society, for society, too, is liable to a mechanization. Conforming to society may be just another way of falling back to the mechanical.

"The 'robot' characters," wrote Eugene Ionesco,

seem to me to be precisely those who belong solely to this or that milieu of social "reality," who are prisoners of it, and who - being no more than social, seeking a solution to their problems only by so-called social means - have become impoverished, alienated, empty. It is precisely the conformist, the petit bourgeois, the ideologist of every society who is lost and dehumanized.<sup>27</sup>

By laughing at the social separatist, Bergson showed his faith in society. Without deliberately withdrawing, the absurd man finds it hard to place himself within the given social context. The Theatre of the Absurd focuses its attention exactly on the plight of human disintegration. To be sure the dislocated individual is still comic. His isolation helps keep the distance that prevents the spectator's identification with him. Commenting on the Theatre of the Absurd Martin Esslin wrote:

Characters with whom the audience fails to identify are inevitably comic. If we identified with the figure of farce who loses his trousers, we should feel embarrassment and shame. If, however, our tendency to identify has been inhibited by making such a character grotesque, we laugh at his predicament. We see what happens to him from the outside, rather than from his own point of view. As the incomprehensibility of the motives, and the often unexplained and mysterious nature of the character's actions in the Theatre of the Absurd effectively prevent identification, such theatre is a comic theatre in spite of the fact that its subject matter is somber, violent, and bitter. That is why the Theatre of the Absurd transcends the categories of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with horror.

If the twentieth-century absurd is really a revised reason, we should perhaps keep this fact in mind when discussing the preponderance of tragic-farce in modern drama and of analogous



modes in the other arts. As Willie Sypher had noted earlier than Esslin: "perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot."<sup>29</sup> On the whole the climate of the Absurd does not seem to favour tragedies. As early as 1939 Eugene O'Neil confirmed that peculiarity when, sensing the impossibility of realizing a life-long ambition to write a tragedy, he remarked:

It's struck me as time goes on, how something funny, even farcical can suddenly, without apparent reason, break up into something gloomy and tragic. . . . A sort of unfair non sequitur, as though events, though life, were manipulated just to confuse us. I think I'm aware of comedy more than I ever was before - a kind of comedy that doesn't stay funny very long.<sup>30</sup>

The comedy that does not stay funny very long struck Shattuck as a sign of what can happen to the comic when it has delivered itself into the hands of the absurd.

In Satie we begin to see clearly that the ultimate modern transformation of the comic may render it no longer laughable, for the comic has delivered itself into the hands of the absurd. . . for all its philosophic implications, the absurd, during la belle époque, still provokes laughter, a quality it loses in the later skirmishes of Kafka, for instance, André Breton, or Sartre. When the absurd loses touch with the humour that reared it, it has ceased to belong to the comic vision of the world. The escapades and outrages of Ubu, Rousseau's portraits and tiger hunts, Apollinaire's pornographic heroes, and Satie's deadpan pseudo lectures partake still of comic innocence. This is not so after 1918, when innocence seems to yield to something far more calculated in meaning and effect. Dada and surrealism and existentialism are seldom funny; they have lost the festivity of the Banquet Years. This history of modern arts may one day be written from the standpoint of the transformations of the comic spirit into varieties of the absurd, a methodical changing of signs.<sup>31</sup>

In the same way the closer the clown comes to the absurd, the further away he moves from the comic. He never, of course, totally identifies





with the tragic hero. The clown is rather a hybrid who can live partly in the world of comedy, partly in that of tragedy, all at one and the same time. His comic acts may at times lie in the shadow of impending tragedy, but the tragedy has its comic relief moments. Certainly, the clown lacks the sustained sublimity of the tragic hero. Being, however, what he is, he is in tune with the spirit of the times that favours a tragi-comic vision of life. This is probably why the clown has emerged as a major figure in drama and other modes of art. It is certainly not surprising that we should find clowns enacting a human drama in Beckett's tragi-comedy Waiting for Godot.





### Chapter Three

In their recently published The Testament of Samuel Beckett, Josephine Jacobsen and William Mueller talk about the Beckett clown-image that

ancient image of the Comic, that flesh-and-blood incarnation of the entertainment world, whose name derives from the adjectival quality of his noun. This comic, this clown, this figure of fun with his ineradicable aura of tragic, serves Beckett visually, verbally, and connotatively.<sup>1</sup>

These two writers are not the first to point to Beckett's clown-image. Most critics assume that the people inhabiting the Beckett landscape are clowns, limited and extended by their consciously assigned role. Even Beckett has been designated a clown.

According to Ruby Cohn, Beckett "plays the slapstick comedy, like any competent clown."<sup>2</sup> The "scholar clown," as some of the critics like to call Beckett's hobo man, is a deliberate reflection of the writer whom Kenner specified as an "academic flâneur."<sup>3</sup>

Kenner also called Beckett a "comedian of the impasse"<sup>4</sup> and found an illustration for his persistence on the path of the impossible in "Emmet Kelly's solemn determination to sweep a circle of light into a dustpan: a haunted man whose fidelity to an impossible task - quite as if someone he desires to oblige exacted it of him - illuminates the dynamics of a tragic sense of duty."<sup>5</sup>

Kenner justified the parallel by quoting Beckett saying: "I am working with impotence, ignorance, I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past."<sup>6</sup> Discussing the statement, the critic added:



The clown exploits impotence, to be sure, when he allows to bubble up into sustained mimetic coherence his own inability to walk a tightrope, missing his footing, misplacing but never dropping his bowler hat (which catches on a button behind his collar, and obeying immutable mechanical laws, is carried round out of reach as he turns to clutch at the space where it was), collapsing in an arc which carried his hands exactly to a graspable stanchion, retarding his pace to zero for long reflection, crowding six desperate acrobatic movements into a split second. He does not imitate the acrobat; it is plain that he could not, he offers us directly, his personal incapacity, an intricate art form.<sup>7</sup>

Beckett is not, of course, a unique case of the artist-clown. Shattuck, we might remember, points out how the artists at the beginning of the century made fools of themselves in order to broach the limits of their art. Beckett's art is a contemplation of limitation so compulsive that it becomes comic. More than anything else his art focuses on artistic limits and his failure to surpass them. Yet, taking construction as his theme, he does not fail to be amazingly resourceful.

The circus clown performs with his hands, his face, his whole body and a variety of objects extending his body as well, balls, rings, sticks, hats, gloves, shoes and whatever else comes handy within his reach. Beckett writing as a clown often substitutes them with what Kenner called the "gestures of the intellect."<sup>8</sup> Instead of the circus clown's routine with objects he plays with language, with words. Jacobsen and Mueller speak admiringly of Beckett's "domination over the dizzying mutations of words, his spectacular ability to juggle their surfaces and their depths."<sup>9</sup> "This process of the brain struggling with ideas,"<sup>10</sup> seems as much wrought with danger and tension and as fascinating





as ropewalking. And just as every single gesture, every motion of the wavering body upon the tight rope assumes a tremendous importance, in the same way every movement of the human mind, every thought and every word that expresses it become equally important. In the universe of Beckett not a word is lost, the tritest cliché becomes meaningful. This is what one might call Beckett's poetry, the clown's poetry. Perhaps the best description of Waiting for Godot has been given by Mr. Michael Myerberg, the play's producer in the U.S. "I think," Mr. Myerberg has been quoted to say, "the play is poetry."<sup>11</sup> Whether through poetry or not the play actually made Beckett's name. Waiting for Godot "served as a catalyst, and almost immediately Beckett and his previous work were being discussed, argued over, lauded, ridiculed and anathematized."<sup>12</sup>

This controversial play has nevertheless brought critics to agree on at least one point: its associations with the traditions of the clown and the vaudeville. Discussing Waiting for Godot Ruby Cohn changed Jean Anouilh's felicitous review of it as "a music-hall sketch of Pascal's *Pensées* performed by the Fratellini clowns," to "a music-hall sketch of Cartesian man performed by Chaplinesque clowns."<sup>13</sup> It is not only the two tramps Didi and Gogo that have been subsumed as clowns. With regard to Pozzo and Lucky, Ruby Cohn pointed out that by "paralleling them with Bim and Bom, Beckett levels Pozzo and Lucky, and virtually identifies them with one another as 'Stalinist Comedians.'"<sup>14</sup>



Even that great absentee Godot, as Allan Lewis suggested, might perhaps stand for "a little God more intimate and clownish, like Pierrot for Pierre, or a combination of God and Chalrot (the French for Charlie Chaplin)."15

Most of the critics quoted above, Hugh Kenner, Josephine Jacobsen and William Mueller, Ruby Cohn, Frederic Hoffman have discussed Waiting for Godot in full-length book studies of Beckett's work. One may assume, of course, that their criticism is based on actual performances of the play which they saw, but in reviewing it, it is obvious, they have given it a scholar's attention. The fact that Waiting for Godot haunted their minds in silent study long after, perhaps, the performance was over, is a test of the play's undeniable intellectual appeal, difficult as this has been to analyse. But Waiting for Godot also has that more immediate and emotional appeal peculiar to any good play. Proof of the second is its impact on an audience of convicts at the San Quentin penitentiary. Martin Esslin in his account of it offers three quotations from the San Quentin News which speak eloquently about it.

The trio of muscle-men, biceps overflowing, who parked all 642 lbs. on the aisle and waited for the girls and funny stuff. When this didn't appear they audibly fumed and audibly decided to wait until the house lights dimmed before escaping. They made one error. They listened and looked two minutes too long - and stayed. Left at the end. All shook . . .

From the moment Robin Wagner's thoughtful and limbolike set was dressed with light, until the last futile and expectant handclasp, was hesitantly activated between the two searching vagrants, the San Francisco company had its audience of captives in its collective hand. . . . Those that had felt a less controversial vehicle should be attempted as a first





play here had their fears allayed a short five minutes after the Samuel Beckett piece began to unfold.

It was an expression, symbolic in order to avoid all personal error, by an author who expected each member of his audience to draw his own conclusions, make his own errors. It asked nothing in point, it forced no dramatized moral on the viewer, it held out no specific hope. . . . We're still waiting for Godot, and shall continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we'll call each other names and swear to part forever - but then, there's no place to go!<sup>16</sup>

"It is said," concludes Esslin, "that Godot himself, as well as turns of phrase and character from the play, have since become a permanent part of the private language, the institutional mythology of San Quentin."<sup>17</sup>

Such accounts attest the compelling quality of the play. Waiting for Godot, dubbed by the critics as a "highly obscure"<sup>18</sup> intellectual play of the "supposedly esoteric avant-garde,"<sup>18</sup> did nevertheless capture the imagination of such an unsophisticated audience as the San Quentin convicts. But the play holds sway over a far greater number of spectators than either avant-garde or prison could offer. This becomes evident from a reading of critical reviews in various magazines. These reviews quite often will register the immediate reactions of the audiences, which in most cases seem delighted with the performance even though the individual reviewer himself may not be. J. C. Trewin, for instance, after admitting that the performance was "exhilarating," and "often funny," goes on to say:

Nothing could have disturbed the pattern. The dramatist next to me remembered that he had lent a sword stick to one of the actors. It would have been easy to have climbed





upon the stage, greeted his friend and had a word or so about it. A sword stick, more or less would not have mattered in this ample sack of a play.<sup>19</sup>

This is obviously meant to be a disparaging comment. And yet it testifies to that easy relationship between audience and players that has always been true of the ancient Greek and Elizabethan drama, the Japanese Kabouki Theatre, the commedia dell'arte. It is said that during the performance of The Clouds Socrates, when his name was mentioned, stood up for the benefit of the audience to see and compare the original with the Aristophanic caricature. This kind of direct contact is even more true of the circus, the vaudeville, and the music-hall, all traditions which Waiting for Godot has used and vitalized. The same critic also calls Waiting for Godot a "highbrow revue" and at the same time describes it as a play in which "The Hatter and the Hare, the Walrus and the Carpenter, and other Carroll couples, might have had a few useful moments."<sup>20</sup> If this is highbrow sophistication it is of a calibre that children can relish showing themselves perhaps wiser than adults. In spite of Mr. Trewin's depreciating tone these comments seem to me to point out attributes rather than defects of the play.

Most of the criticism of Waiting for Godot admits, in accordance with Mr. Trewin, that the play, when all is said, is entertaining — "an enchanting piece of legerdemain."<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless many critics seem to be too much in earnest to appreciate this fact. But isn't entertainment one of the goals of comedy, or of all art for that matter? True, Beckett's critics attribute



the success of his play to the actors' skill. "The miracle of Godot," writes one critic, "is a less calculated obfuscation of the script than the loveable, skilled performance of Bert Lahr as the raggle-taggle tramp. . . ."22 Certainly a skilful actor can sometimes show an indifferent play to advantage. But a skilful actor also knows that he owes his allegiance to the text. As Fernard Ledoux, a distinguished actor put it once, "Un comédien se soumettre au texte. Serait-il admissible qu'un musicien interprète du Bach comme de la musique Tzigane?"23 Mr. Lahr's performance does not seem independent of the text. But one might object following another critic "Bert Lahr . . . has been quoted as saying that he has no idea what the damn play is about."24

Mr. Lahr gives a fine gaudy vaudeville performance, but I'm afraid his ignorance of the meaning of the part is only too accurately a fact, and the spiritual damage to the play strikes me as considerable. The others . . . are less boisterously entertaining, possibly because they do have some glimmerings of comprehension now and then.25

Actors, however, are a special breed known for their peculiar sensibility and can often do justice to a part simply by feel. In the opinion of another critic Bert Lahr's acting is in perfect harmony with the tone of the play.

Bert Lahr . . . endows the role with the clown's wistful bewilderment, evocative capers and broad but beautifully precise touches of comedy. Far more Bert Lahr suggests all dislocated humanity in one broken down man.26

There are two interesting aspects in the critical reviews of Waiting for Godot. One is the clashing of opinions, an instance of which has been given above. The other is the gradual change of attitude in the whole body of critical opinion as time went on. In chronological perspective the appreciation of the play has





been growing. The performances of subsequent Beckett plays have made Waiting for Godot appear each time both more likely to become venerable and more accessible to understanding. These aspects bring out the relative unreliability of theatre reviewing. As Eric Bentley, a distinguished critic himself, has been ready to observe,

The limits of theatre criticism are soon reached. Here we have no lofty form of meditation conceived in solitude, recollected in tranquillity, and incorporated in large art-form or voluminous treatise. We have only a man's immediate response immediately recorded in the briefest bit of prose.<sup>27</sup>

It has become obvious that the play has complexities of meaning which require the full exercise of the "lofty form of meditation conceived in solitude," of which Mr. Bentley speaks. Yet its use of vaudeville devices and clowns have provoked many conflicting "immediate" responses. We may guess that what has really puzzled the critics has not been so much Beckett's vehicle but the clown-figure which he substitutes for twentieth-century man. Critics could have found matter for reflection in the fact that the century has paid so much homage to the clown.



## Chapter Four

### (i)

It is very hard to discuss a play about which so much has already been said. Some repetition will be unavoidable, and certain conclusions on which there is consensus of opinion will be taken for granted. I shall begin with two of them. One is that the characters in Waiting for Godot are clowns. The other is that the play is a commentary on the peculiar situation in which twentieth-century man finds himself.

Basically there are three types of clowns, the "august," the "Joey," and the "Charlie." The roots of the "august" clown go deep into time. He is the court-jester, ruff-throated and peaked-cap, the clown whom Rouault loved to paint. The "Joey" is the clown of the physical, whose prototype was Jo Grimaldi. The "Joey," like almost any other clown, fails in the feats of strength he performs, but not before he has exhibited his prodigious skill and endurance. Lastly, Charlie is the clown that Chaplin impersonated and whom we have already discussed in detail. Considering the variety of clown-figures traced in this paper we can readily see that this frame of reference is inadequate, a proof that the clown is developing beyond tradition. Nevertheless, this simple classification will be seen to be convenient for either associating or pointing out differences between the various clown-types and the clowns in the play.



The nature of the four clowns in the play is, I think, in itself a comment on man's situation in modern times, at least Beckett's vision of it. The setting of Waiting for Godot places these four clowns in a further metaphoric relation. By implication the setting also defines the nature of the characters appearing in it. Its description is spare, almost cryptic. "A country road. A tree."<sup>1</sup> The place has the ominous air of the undefinable, the unknown. The tree fails to establish its identity, since its own identity remains to the end unsettled - one of many incertitudes. The visual information is supplemented by casual references to the place as "a void,"<sup>2</sup> "a muckheap,"<sup>2</sup> "the Cackon country."<sup>2</sup> Considering Beckett's erudition one cannot help suspecting that his use of the word Cackon - KAKON in Greek meaning bad, evil, wicked, unlucky - is not fortuitous. If it is true that the setting stands as a metaphor for the human situation this is, indeed, a desolate one. In its strangeness it could remind us of the world of unreasonable silence in the midst of which Camus' absurd man feels himself victimized.

Discussing La Strada Fellini pointed out that the road meant a journey and a meeting. In Beckett's play it also stands for a waiting. As the play begins the first set of clowns, Gogo and Didi, meet to wait, faithful to a mysterious appointment with an unknown character, Godot. In the context of their surroundings, it is not surprising that the two characters should be tramps, poor, dispossessed, suffering and degraded human beings. One critic has pointed out, quite ironically, that their only





possessions are their clothes. We must assume from a stage direction which Beckett has allowed us ("Gesture towards his [Estragon's] rags"<sup>3</sup>) that these are tattered outfits. Poverty has long associations with clownship. Gelasimus, a laughter-maker in Plautus' Stichus, or Paradise Rebuffed informs his audience: "It was poverty that made me to be a droll; for whenever she reaches a person she instructs him thoroughly in every art. I am in the habit of refusing no person if any one asks me out to eat."<sup>4</sup> Gogo's hungry eagerness to reach for the bones that Pozzo throws away matches Gelasimus'. Charlie has often relished thrown away bones, too. The two tramps, sometimes described as "Chaplinesque," look, indeed, like distant relations of that other "born scrounger" and "purloiner" of remnants who is determined to "find enjoyment where he can." Like Charlie's their world is "the eternally recurrent world of zero hour," "where all enjoyment is vicarious and all suffering real," the world of "the dugouts, the muddy roads, the leafless trees."<sup>5</sup> But Gogo and Didi seem to lack Charlie's thirst of life and lust for action, his godlike immunity and his triumphant smile on the edge of the precipice down which he knows he must fall. For though he must fall he cannot die. Crossed by odds Charlie will still wave his cane or kick his shoes "in a gesture of invincibility."<sup>6</sup> Such hope is not evident in the Cackon country. Waiting is best summed up as an immobility. Gogo and Didi are "miracles of passivity"<sup>7</sup>, as one critic said. As such they are closer to Derain's Harlequins and even to some of the Rouault clowns like



the Old Clown and the Wounded Clown. With the former they seem to share some unbearable knowledge though they lack the peace that has settled on the features of the old man, reflecting perhaps the end of the journey towards the absolute. Gogo and Didi on the other hand must still persist doggedly on its pursuit, waiting, fretting and doubting every single step they take. Like the clowns in the Wounded Clown, they, too, experience suffering and humiliation. But the bent down heads of Rouault's clowns have a strength and a nobility which Gogo and Didi seem to lack.

"His Highness,"<sup>8</sup> Gogo, apparently spends the nights in a ditch. (The combination cannot fail to produce laughter and keep at bay "the thought of the immense and unknown tragedies of the lonely wanderers of the night. . . ." <sup>9</sup>) There, in the ditch, he is beaten, for reasons which are inexplicable and perhaps nonexistent, by a lot of people vaguely referred to as "they". The beating is inevitable as well as senseless. Here is a circus routine worming itself into the realities of life or, does the routine reflect the realities?

In recent pantomimes at the Lyceum, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, one of the Egberts had no other share in existence except injuries. His partner, whether actually exasperated or merely argumentative, struck him on the mouth, kicked him or flung him across the stage to vent his wrath or illustrate a theory. Though preferring to avoid blows wherever possible, he accepted them as natural to his station of life, blinked, stood up when told to, and collapsed the next second of yet another blow.<sup>10</sup>

All this fits well into the pattern of the clown as He-Who-Gets-Slapped. Hugh Kenner, however, has told a real life story that reflects the senselessness of Gogo's beating even more powerfully.





Walking one day on a Paris street, Beckett was stabbed by a tramp. When later the writer visited the tramp in prison and inquired to know why he got the answer: "Je ne sais pas monsieur."<sup>11</sup>

Gogo's report of the beating, delivered in indifferent, even slightly annoyed tones almost as if he were bored with the whole rotten routine of it, fails to move us to pity. Yet, there is no doubt Gogo is the downtrodden with whom our sympathies should go. When he compares himself to Christ, the comparison is with a major victim figure, a Christ shorn of divinity, entirely human and senselessly suffering, such as he appears for example in Dostoevsky's novels hand in hand with his underground heroes. Gogo and Didi are themselves "underground" men, "reduced" and "contradictory"<sup>12</sup> beings.

Waiting for Godot has been described as a play of incertitudes. These are often the result of crippling contradictions, which, in the case of the two clowns make for comic irresolutions. "Don't let's do anything. It's safer." proposes Estragon.

Vladimir: Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand.  
Estragon: On the other hand it might be better to strike the iron before it freezes.<sup>13</sup>

This sort of argument ends both acts of the play in a comic impasse; the urge to go is annulled by immobility.

Estragon: Well, shall we go?  
Vladimir: Yes, let's go.  
They do not move.<sup>14</sup>

Such contradictions make the two tramps both comic and pathetic. They fit into Kierkegaard's definition of the act of existing as "a striving . . . both pathetic and comic in the same degree."<sup>15</sup>



Nevertheless, contradiction suits the nature of the clown, a complex being who is not restricted to one mask consistently all the time. In this way Gogo and Didi, the victims (for Didi too, is suffering and has seen the end of his respectable days) can turn aggressors. The same men who suffer the brutality of an irrational world can also inflict it upon others. When in the second act the two tramps find themselves masters of the situation with the fallen Pozzo and Lucky at their mercy they do not refrain from striking and kicking them. At another point Vladimir emerges as a plain murderer.

Estragon: The best thing would be to kill me, like the other.

Vladimir: What other? (Pause.) What other?

Estragon: Like billions of others.

Vladimir: (sententious). To every man his little cross. (He sighs.) Till he dies. (Afterthought.) And is forgotten.<sup>16</sup>

This is all, of course, meant for laughs. In Enid Welsford's record of fools, we read how one Conrad Pocher qualifies for the post of court-jester after a "horrible exhibition of homicidal mania,"<sup>17</sup> during which he hanged a boy on a tree because he was scabrous. In more recent years Charlie has appeared in the role of the murderer. Chaplin created Monsieur Verdoux as a mirror to the world's "lack of conscience . . . collective wickedness and folly."<sup>18</sup> Beckett's clowns at such moments would seem to be making much the same comment.

Waiting for Godot has often been called a static play.

The truth is that it gives scope to much more physical action than is apparent at first sight. While waiting the two tramps rush in and out of the stage, hop around, kick, stumble and fall





down, stagger back to their feet again, imitate the tree, and the other set of clowns, Pozzo and Lucky, do their "movements," "elevations," "relaxations," "elongations."<sup>19</sup> Aside from the specific stage directions there is also room for improvised action. Vladimir, for example, danced while singing in Mrs. Lee Royce's production of the play. (Edmonton, December 1964). It is true that such action hardly resembles the "Joey's" prodigious acrobatics. But it indicates some kind of traffic upon the stage. In the same way Estragon's peevish remarks, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!"<sup>20</sup> is mocking truth in the face since Pozzo and Lucky are already there. Things do happen in Waiting for Godot. An event, wrote Susanne Langer, covers "all time-space occurrence, even the persistence of objects, the repetitious rhythms of life, the occasion of a thought as well as an earthquake."<sup>21</sup> According to this definition the play is teeming with events. The tree, the boots, the bowler hats, the stories the two tramps try to tell each other, their games, their repeatedly ineffectual effort to hang themselves, their thoughts and feelings, all these can be counted on as events. For the doubting spectators there are the more palpable comings and goings. A boy comes twice whose message, however vague and confusing, reinforces the act of waiting. And there are, of course, Pozzo and Lucky, a spectacle which changes from one act to the other eliciting a variety of responses from the two friends. Finally, there is the major event of the play, perhaps deliberately counterbalancing Pozzo's blindness and Lucky's dumbness: the miraculous





growth of leaves upon the tree which to all appearances had been almost dead. Obviously we cannot take Gogo at his word. After all, words in this play are more often than not used as toys. Instead of playing a game of balls, the two clowns play one of words. "Come on, Gogo, return the ball, can't you once in a way?"<sup>22</sup> urges Didi exasperated by his partner's unwillingness to join him in his effort to pass the time. For above all the two tramps concentrate their efforts on providing pastimes for themselves and the audience, of course. For those who have taken the trouble to be present at the performance, the play must be "an occupation," "a relaxation," "a recreation,"<sup>23</sup> a means that will help them pass the time. The two clowns do not forget that this is their assigned role, a role consecrated by time and tradition.

The pastimes are often trivial but, nevertheless, indispensable to the success of the play and ultimately to the success of waiting. They help the two tramps rob time of its victory over them by enduring it and thus keeping faithful to their mysterious appointment with Godot. They are like miniature comic-relief scenes during which the tension of waiting runs in an under-current before gushing forth again with each desperate "What do we do now?" "Wait for Godot."<sup>24</sup>

Gogo and Didi live and sometimes flounder in the midst of words.

vladimir: (sure of himself). Good. We weren't here yesterday evening. Now what did we do yesterday evening?



Estragon: Do?  
 Vladimir: Try and remember.  
 Estragon: Do . . . I suppose we blathered.  
 Vladimir: (controlling himself). About what?  
 Estragon: Oh . . . this and that I suppose, nothing in particular. (With assurance). Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century.<sup>25</sup>

If Gogo and Didi represent mankind, as they say they do, this can indeed be a very wry remark on the human situation delivered with impact mockery. It is enough to sit and listen to any ordinary gathering of people, a radio or T.V. programme to realize how true to life this blathering is. On the other hand without it at all we would be at a loss.

As time-killers the two clowns have chosen to fight with words. Though they mock their weapons their talk has often a poignant edge to it; but their use of words is far more effective than they admit.. Docebene, a famous buffoon, remarked on one occasion to the Emperor Charles, "My lord, you may well hope to conquer the whole world since you are on such good terms with the Pope and with me. You fight with the sword, the Pope with the seals, and I with words. Whoever can resist such a combination?"<sup>26</sup> This remark gives us a taste of the clown's impudence but of his power as well. Even without the sword and the seals his words are irresistible. In the hands of the old Irish fili or poets who could rhyme rats dead they were potent weapons. Enid Welsford has suggested a connection of the Irish poet with the court-jester. Comgan Mac-da-Cherda, a historical personage in spite of his legendary character, was officially known as "Arch-poet and Fool





of all Ireland." In Waiting for Godot Gogo asserts the relationship by pointing to his rags. The gesture not only makes poets out of fools but fools out of poets as well. In spite of it, however, the two tramps compose extempore poetry which survives the evening.

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

Estragon: It's so we won't think.

Vladimir: We have that excuse.

Estragon: It's so we won't hear.

Vladimir: We have our reasons.

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Silence.

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

Silence.

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient.

Silence.

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves.<sup>27</sup>

Today we talk of the magic of poetry as a cliché but there was a time when the poet was considered a real magician. Welsford describes the Irish poets as a "curious amalgam of wizard, entertainer and antiquarian."<sup>28</sup> Drawing on the supernatural power of their art



the poets could prophesy, kill and create. Didi and Gogo aware perhaps of their illustrious ancestry admit: "Yes, yes, we're magicians." The stage direction reads that the assertion is pronounced "impatiently,"<sup>29</sup> but just as clowns can mock poets and produce poetry they can also mock magicians and at the same time successfully employ their art. There can be no doubt Gogo and Didi mock words unsparingly. Like most things in this play the almighty and magic words have their dark side as well. They can be like the magician's tricks in Bergman's film, "miserable rotten lies."<sup>30</sup> "Words words," Didi comments despairingly over the boy's ambiguous information. And Gogo more tersely remarks: "It's all a pack of lies."<sup>31</sup> But are they really? By mocking the two clowns do not necessarily destroy the power of words. The koshare or 'Delight Makers,' sacred clowns of the Indians, will test the sacredness of their religious rituals by mimicking and mocking the priest at the most solemn moments of ceremonies. The Feast of Fools in the Middle Ages had a similar function. In these cases faith and religion survived the test. Waiting for Godot, a construction of words, also meets the test successfully. Part of the success is due to the very ambiguities in the language, its deliberate waverings, loss of balance, pratfalls, as it imitates the clowns. If, after all, Gogo and Didi are to speak in character the language must follow their own deflating contradictions, and clown itself. Ambiguity which, as Empson said, is at the roots of poetry, has been associated with the comic as well.





As he [Apollinaire] understood, as recent criticism has too often forgotten, that unrestrained ambiguity is always tintured with the comic. Its apparent confusion of meaning surprises us with a profound revelation of the inner mind.<sup>32</sup>

It is already obvious that one of the favourite games of Gogo and Didi - as well as of the other set of clowns - is passing around words of mockery. They do this sometimes parodying, sometimes criticizing situations. Criticism is, of course, a legitimate function of the clown. The two tramps revel in their role as critics without failing, by implication or directly, to pass judgement on that either. When Pozzo asks for their opinion on his act, they first adopt the pose of the complacent critic.

Pozzo: How did you find me? (Vladimir and Estragon look at him blankly.) Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively bad?  
 Vladimir: (first to understand). Oh very good, very very good.  
 Pozzo: (to Estragon). And you, Sir?  
 Estragon: Oh tray bong, tray tray tray bong.  
 Pozzo: (fervently). Bless you, gentlemen, bless you! (Pause). I have such need of encouragement! (Pause). I weakened a little towards the end, you didn't notice?  
 Vladimir: Perhaps just a teeny weeny little bit.  
 Estragon: I thought it was intentional.<sup>33</sup>

A minute later of course, they feel free to contradict themselves. They do it with the easy grace of the circus clown who can embrace you and trip you all in one breath. On Pozzo's asking if they have found his act tedious Estragon admits: "Somewhat,"<sup>34</sup> and Vladimir complains that he has been better entertained. A little later Vladimir assumes and ridicules the posture of an aesthete. Pozzo having just told them that Lucky's dance is called the Net, Vladimir meditates: "(squirming like an aesthete). There's something about it. . . ."<sup>35</sup>





Critics, however, receive the ultimate abuse when the two clowns decide to call each other names in order to pass the time. In doing so they might at the same time be giving a compact history of the clown, his associations with physical deformity, mental deficiency, social reduction, religion.

Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other.  
They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other.  
 Vladimir: Moron!  
 Estragon: Vermin!  
 Vladimir: Abortion!  
 Estragon: Morpion!  
 Vladimir: Sewer-rat!  
 Estragon: Curate!  
 Vladimir: Cretin!  
 Estragon: (with finality). Crrritic!  
 Vladimir: Oh!  
He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.<sup>36</sup>

The ritual of social civilities is taken to task and ridiculed a couple of times throughout the play. One instance involves Pozzo as well.

Estragon: Then adieu.  
 Pozzo: Adieu.  
 Vladimir: Adieu.  
 Pozzo: Adieu.  
Silence. No one moves.  
 Vladimir: Adieu.  
 Pozzo: Adieu.  
 Estragon: Adieu.  
Silence.  
 Pozzo: And thank you.  
 Vladimir: Thank you.  
 Pozzo: Not at all.  
 Estragon: Yes yes.  
 Pozzo: No no.  
 Vladimir: Yes yes.  
 Estragon: No no.  
Silence.  
 Pozzo: I don't seem to be able . . . (long hesitation)  
 . . . to depart.  
 Estragon: Such is life.<sup>37</sup>



This is undoubtedly the sort of repetition which as Bergson pointed out elicits laughter. But the comic is coupled with the pathetic when one considers the awkwardness of the situation, Pozzo's "long hesitation," even Estragon's wry platitude. "Such is life."

This last one is a fair example of Beckett's masterful use of clichés. By restoring them to their bare meaning Beckett has lent enormity to linguistic clichés. There is always the feeling that something mysterious is lurking beneath their threadbare texture. Moreover they assist in enhancing the clown's incompetence. Gogo and Didi comment on their helplessness by using clichés, allegedly not the strongest forms of language.

Estragon: Fancy that. (He raises what remains of the carrot by the stub of leaf, twirls it before his eyes.)  
 Vladimir: Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.  
 Vladimir: With me it's just the opposite.  
 Estragon: In other words?  
 Vladimir: I get used to the muck as I go along.  
 Estragon: (After long reflection.) Is that the opposite?  
 Vladimir: Question of temperament.  
 Estragon: Of character.  
 Vladimir: Nothing you can do about it.  
 Estragon: No use struggling.  
 Vladimir: One is what one is.  
 Estragon: No use wriggling.  
 Vladimir: The essential doesn't change.  
 Estragon: Nothing to be done.<sup>38</sup>

The commentary sounds very much like a chorus song. Gogo and Didi often assume the role of the chorus, incident after all to their profession. As Enid Welsford has pointed out, the fool, by being a critic of the action and a link between the stage and the auditorium plays a role which resembles that of the Greek chorus. Though the critics may mock themselves as critics they remain with





the role nevertheless. Their mockery resembles the mockery that Charlie practiced.

The mockery is lighthearted, but there are overtones of tragedy. . . . Now for the first time he mocks himself and enters those heady regions where the mocker mocks himself mocking himself and then goes on to mock himself mocking himself mocking himself and so on ad infinitum, as though mockery was something that could be held up between parallel mirrors and reflected interminably in a long gallery of gradually diminished brightness.<sup>39</sup>

The process of thinking and reasoning is mimicked and mocked and eventually undermined.

Pozzo:        (normal voice). No matter! What was I saying.  
                  (He ponders.) Wait. (Ponders.) Well now isn't  
                  that . . . . (He raises his head). Help me!

Estragon: Wait!

Vladimir: Wait!

Pozzo:        Wait!

All three take off their hats simultaneously,  
                  press their hands to their foreheads, concentrate.

Estragon: (triumphantly). Ah!

Vladimir: He has it.

Pozzo:        (impatiently) Well?

Estragon: Why doesn't he put down his bags?

Vladimir: Rubbish!

Pozzo:        Are you sure?

Vladimir: Damn it haven't you already told us?

Pozzo:        I've already told you?

Estragon: He's already told us?

Vladimir: Anyway he has put them down.

Estragon: (glance at Lucky). So he has. And what of it?

Vladimir: Since he has put down the bags it is impossible  
                  we should have asked why he does not do so.

Pozzo:        Stoutly reasoned!

Estragon: And why has he put them down?

Pozzo:        Answer us that.

Vladimir: In order to dance.

Estragon: True!

Pozzo:        True!

Silence. They put on their hats.<sup>40</sup>

This is a very competent show of incompetence. The thinking assisted by hats and concentrated silence is hilarious and it helps us laugh, but it is obvious that it can't help the clowns very far.



At the end of this thinking bout they, as well as we, are still in the dark as to why Lucky doesn't put down the bags. (Which, in any case, is not exactly the original request; Gogo had asked to know about the time Lucky refused to obey his master). The chance of getting any real piece of information has moved further away. No knowledge has been achieved; defective memories have only added to the accumulating uncertainties of the play. Reason is humiliated. So is morality later on. In the second act while the fallen Pozzo is crying for help, the two friends, unmoved, deliberate the pros and cons of helping him. Vladimir seizes the opportunity to deliver a highly dramatic and rhetorical speech on ethics.

Vladimir: Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (Pause. Vehemently). Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say? (Estragon says nothing). It is true that when with folded arms we weigh the pros and cons we are no less a credit to our species. The tiger bounds to the help of his congeners without the least reflection, or else he slinks away into the depths of the thickets.<sup>41</sup>

Without the least reflection the tiger puts man to shame. Morality flounders. Reason seems indeed to be "straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths."<sup>42</sup> In this chaotic world, as Estragon remarks, "We are all born mad. Some remain so."





The whole deliberation is highly disconcerting. In the midst of what might be tragedy we have a comic pause. As a result the situation is ambivalent and tense. When it is resolved it is not in the name of morality and reason but for the sake of a "diversion." Gogo and Didi decide to help Pozzo for the fun of it (plus monetary considerations). They take to it as they would take to a game - children perhaps playing the doctor and the nurse with the wounded patient lying before them. When Vladimir falls as a result of his effort to pull Pozzo up the fall is more in the nature of the pratfall than anything else. Then Gogo repeats it and the helplessness of the four characters lying down on "sweet mother earth!"<sup>44</sup> (a terse irony) becomes more ludicrous than pitiable. In the new situation helping Pozzo is out of the question, but Gogo invents new pastimes. He finds trying Pozzo with other names amusing and when at a loss for any better diversion proposes getting up for a change, and comments ironically on the efficiency of will power: "a child's play."<sup>45</sup>

Even in grave moments the two clowns can carry on blissfully like children, a capacity that vitalizes their act and sometimes masks it as well. Most of their pastimes have their roots in the world of children. Children often call each other names, exchange blows, recite cruel and obscene verses just for the fun of it. "Curse me!" Didi urges Gogo, imitating the burdened Lucky; and Gogo after long and innocent reflection comes up with an innocuous "Naughty!" in whose echo the following abusive and





obscene names "Gonococcus! Spirochete!"<sup>46</sup> still sound mild. Obscenities have a time-honoured history as sure and safe conductors of laughter going back perhaps to the phallic songs that gave rise to comedy. Children take pleasure in reciting verses which verge on the obscene.

Mickey Mouse, in his house  
Taking off his trousers.  
Quick Mum, smack his bum  
And chase him round the houses.<sup>47</sup>

We might perhaps remember that some very important stage business has to do with Gogo's trousers. "Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles."<sup>48</sup> This is all regular circus routine where trousers fall usually at the shot of a gun. In Waiting for Godot this simple routine is responsible for turning the current of tragedy into comedy. Ropes and hanging, too, often figure in children's verses like an ominous joke.

Tell, tell yer Auntie Bell  
Tae buy a rope and hang herself.<sup>49</sup>

Hanging provided Deburau with some great laughter provoking business. In despair and determined to put an end to his life he looks around for a suitable place to hang himself, but his rope is too much in request by children who want to skip with it or housewives who use it as a clothesline so that the obliging clown never gets a chance to prepare himself a noose. Death is in this way arrested as it should be in comedy.

In comedy it is inconceivable that people should really die. They may assume the postures of death, and then we howl with laughter, and the nearer they approach to the postures of death the louder is the laughter.<sup>50</sup>



Hanging in the play is suggested as an entertainment "while waiting," and Estragon's wild excitement over the unexpected possibility of having an erection is of course meant for laughs. In the meantime the question of suicide, "the most urgent of all questions"<sup>51</sup> for the absurd man, or so Camus thinks, has been insidiously considered. Our immediate response to this talk of hanging may be laughter but the afterthoughts taste differently. Pretty much the same is true of our total response to the play.

A lot of cruel remarks and acts in Waiting for Godot give rise to mirth in much the same way that children's verses of cruelty do. Beating one black and blue is a trigger to let laughter off in such spectacles as the Punch and Judy show or the Karaghioz Shadow Theatre. When a child chants -

I'm going to tell of you  
You put me in a dustbin  
And made me black and blue. -52

this is not news for tears but for laughter. Here partly is the reason why we fail to bestow our pity on Gogo when he announces that he has been beaten. Gogo has many of the petulant mannerisms of a child. His frankly animal-like hunger, little tantrums, jealousies and revengeful urges belong rather to the idiosyncrasy of a child. He flairs up in anger for no reason at all, when Didi offers him, by mistake, a turnip instead of a carrot; he pulls a long face over his friend's singing contently by himself while he is away; he relishes kicking Lucky back in return for the kick he has received. Once he sees a chance for a game he is all for playing it; he has fun assisting Pozzo through his act; he jumps





at any notion which shows promise of affording a little pastime. "That's the idea, let's contradict each other." "That's the idea, let's ask each other questions." "That's the idea, let's abuse each other."<sup>53</sup> "That wasn't such a bad little canter,"<sup>54</sup> he admits complacently at the end of a word game. But like a child he wearies fast. Every once in a while he pouts a question at Vladimir. "What do we do now?"<sup>55</sup> When the excitement of the game is over there's nothing for him to do but go to sleep. He does so with a child's - and an animal's - admirable ease. "You stink of garlic!"<sup>56</sup> Gogo accuses Didi and reminds us of a child's response to odours.

Horse, pig, dog, goat  
You stink, I don't.<sup>57</sup>

The observation follows immediately after the two friends have - at last - embraced each other. But such demonstrations of tenderness are not allowed more than a breath's space. In the same way Vladimir has hardly begun his lullaby when he is told angrily, "Not so loud."<sup>58</sup> At another crucial moment just as Gogo is about to lend a hand and help his fallen friend up he recoils mercilessly. "Who farted?"<sup>59</sup> This sorts in with the circus routines which depend on, Hoffman remarks, "any disgusting or vulgar defeat or collapse of sentimental expectations."<sup>60</sup> Its efficiency to undermine any exalted feelings is obviously great. Clowns have in the past been considered as simple-minded and naive as children. Their naiveté on the other hand has at times been used "as a convenient cloak for unscrupulous trickery."<sup>61</sup> Gogo and Didi are neither simpletons



nor rogues. Their childish ways are a means of appealing to, teasing and beguiling the audience; moreover they help stress, once again, their pathetic helplessness.

(ii)

While the two friends are waiting for Godot another set of characters makes its appearance. Neither is Godot, at least as far as names go (which are, however, not very reliable means of identification; Estragon is also Adam - in the French version Katullus - Vladimir responds to Mr. Albert and Pozzo to both Cain and Abel). Lucky sounds more like a nickname than a real one. But there is no doubt, in the state he is in, he cannot be the much-awaited-for Mr. Godot, who is expected to resolve all the clowns' ambiguities, questions and problems. Pozzo might look like a distant echo. He first appears, it is true, in the role of the bullying master. But he cannot fool us for long that he, too, is helpless. The smug self-content with which he presents himself, the presumptuous authority he assumes as he surveys the scene, the bloated confidence, are more a pose than anything else. His whole bearing is exaggerated like a cartoon's. His very name rings a false note. Pronounced as he pronounces it Pppozzo it sounds like a toy gun uncorked. Its dignity is further undermined by Vladimir's blundering - the stage direction reads "conciliating" - remark: "I once knew a family called Gozzo. The mother had the clap."<sup>62</sup>



At first sight Pozzo appears to be different from the two tramps. Certainly he cannot come from their class of outcasts. He claims the ownership of things such as the tatterdemelions Gogo and Didi could never have pretended to own. Among other things he claims possession of the land and, most awesome of all, of a human being. If the two tramps are representative of the disinherited hordes of mankind, Pozzo, who is himself "all humanity,"<sup>63</sup> too, must represent the minority of landowners and capitalists. His is not the aimless existence of waiting for, as he says in busy tones he has a schedule to observe. His gestures and his talk are different too. Hugh Kenner talks of the "finished theatricality"<sup>64</sup> of Pozzo pitted against the "seeming improvisation"<sup>64</sup> of the two tramps. Improvisation helps to enhance the helplessness of Gogo and Didi. It is in keeping with an existence in which nothing is certain, nothing is known, every step has to be taken as a new experience, a part unlearned, and at one's own risk. Pozzo's confident notes on the other hand draw on a stock of memorized sentences and speeches. Pozzo after all acknowledges the help of a teacher behind all "these beautiful things"<sup>65</sup> he can talk about. The teacher happens to be quite ironically Lucky: a miserable buffoon. What Pozzo has learned sounds like bits of popular wisdom: "From the meanest creature one departs wiser, richer, more conscious of one's blessings"<sup>66</sup>; or, authoritative opinions on a closed system of things: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops. The same is true





of the laugh"<sup>67</sup>; or, perhaps the art of enlarging on the trivial giving it an insidious twist.

Pozzo: (who hasn't listened). Ah yes! The night.  
 (He raises his head). But be a little more attentive, for pity's sake, otherwise we'll never get anywhere. (He looks at the sky.) Look! (All look at the sky except Lucky who is dozing off again. Pozzo jerks the rope.) Will you look at the sky, pig! (Lucky looks at the sky). Good, that's enough. (They stop looking at the sky.) What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky. It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. (Pause) In these latitudes. (Pause). When the weather is fine. (Lyrical). An hour ago (he looks at his watch, prosaic) roughly (lyrical) after having poured forth even since (he hesitates, prosaic) say ten o'clock in the morning (lyrical) tireless torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale (gesture of the two hands lapsing by stages) pale, ever a little paler, a little paler until (dramatic pause, ample gesture of the two hands flung wide apart) pppfff! finished! it comes to rest. But - (hand raised in admonition) - but behind this veil of gentleness and peace night is charging (vibrantly) and will burst upon us (snaps his fingers) pop! like that! (his inspiration leaves him) just when we least expect it. (Silence. Gloomily.) That's how it is on this bitch of an earth.<sup>68</sup>

The speech could easily fit into a music-hall repertory or a circus routine. It is as hilarious as it is meaningless though the last gloomy sentence would put some doubt on that.

The speech is apparently meant as the highlight of Pozzo's training. And it goes with such variety of tone and gesture. It could, of course, also be a clever take off on acting. In his eager anxiety to know how well his act went Pozzo forgoes the pose of the self-possessed master. He sounds more like a flustered child and his language betrays him as such on one or two more occasions. "Oh I'm only a small smoker, a



very small smoker, I'm not in the habit of smoking two pipes one on top of the other, it makes (hand to heart, signing) my heart go pit-a-pat."<sup>69</sup> Or: ". . . what have I done with my watch? (Fumbles). A genuine half-hunter, gentlemen, with dead-beat escapement! (Sobbing) Twas my grandpa gave it to me!"<sup>70</sup>

The bully is breaking down. There are still more demonstrations of his incompetence. In spite of his "finished theatricality" Pozzo is confronted with problems which he cannot solve without some outside help.

Pozzo: . . . I'd very much like to sit down, but I don't quite know how to go about it.

Estragon: Could I be of any help?

Pozzo: If you asked me perhaps.

Estragon: What?

Pozzo: If you asked me to sit down.

Estragon: Would that be a help?

Pozzo: I fancy so.

Estragon: Here we go. Be seated, Sir, I beg you.

Pozzo: No no, I wouldn't think of it! (Pause. Aside.) Ask me again.

Estragon: Come, come, take a seat I beseech you, you'll get pneumonia.

Pozzo: You really think so?

Estragon: Why it's absolutely certain.<sup>71</sup>

At this instance Estragon and Pozzo are performers on an equal footing co-operating in order to resolve a little piece of stage business. Both characters seem improvising, at least as much as the presence of a dramatist allows improvising. The ritual of sitting down with its extravagant reasoning turns out to be a delightful game in which Gogo enters with his usual enthusiasm. The audience (in which we must include Didi, Lucky's attention is too unreliable for him to join the rest of the spectators) is even let into the secret of an "aside" as if the two clowns wanted to





make sure that their act should be taken for what it is, namely an act.

The request for help on Pozzo's part punctures further the independence that presumably belongs to the master. Pozzo does not hold on to one role throughout the play. Even in the first act we catch a glimpse of him as both Cain and Abel, executioner and victim. When Gogo and Didi accuse him of having taken advantage of Lucky he is extremely upset.

Pozzo:     (groaning, clutching his head). I can't bear it . . . any longer . . . the way he goes on . . . you've no idea . . . it's terrible . . . he must go . . . (he waves his arms) . . . I'm going mad . . . (he collapses, his head in his hands) . . . I can't bear it . . . any longer . . . .<sup>72</sup>

Could this unaccountable change of pitch on the other hand be simply one of the wiles of the tyrant fishing for his public's sympathy? It is not impossible. In any case when he has enlisted it to his favour, his fit subsides:

Pozzo:     (calmer). Gentlemen, I don't know what came over me. Forgive me. Forget all I said. (More and more his old self). I don't remember exactly what it was, but you may be sure there wasn't a word of truth in it. (Drawing himself up, striking his chest.) Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer? Frankly?<sup>73</sup>

The surprise of the change belongs to comedy. By resorting to a different key, Pozzo has at the same time, in a cunning and subtle way, exposed the unreliability of man's reason. The suddenness of Gogo and Didi's switch from a defence of Lucky to that of Pozzo makes sympathy and affection appear as unaccountable as cruelty. The two tramps side up with the downtrodden as casually as they attack them.



Like the two tramps Pozzo is a puzzle of contradictions. The assurance with which he asks the question: "Do I look like a man that can be made to suffer?" is matched by the assurance with which he answers it. "For I shall suffer, no doubt about that."<sup>74</sup> (This pattern of question-answer is met again in the second act: Question: Pozzo: "Why doesn't he [Lucky] answer when I call?"<sup>75</sup> Answer: Pozzo: "But he [Lucky] is dumb."<sup>76</sup>) Does Pozzo really know that he will suffer? The preceding question would put that to doubt. Or, supposing that he did, does he know why? Ruby Cohn's observation: "The ethical comment is evident: a master-slave relationship blinds the master and mutes the slave"<sup>77</sup> sounds plausible. On the other hand, we must remember Pozzo pronounces his sentence. "For I shall suffer," etc. immediately after wondering whether he has done enough to entertain the two tramps.

Pozzo: Is there anything I can do, that's what I ask myself, to cheer them up? I have given them bones, I have talked to them about this and that, I have explained the twilight, admittedly. But is it enough, that's what tortures me, is it enough?<sup>78</sup>

Apparently Pozzo cannot do enough, at least not as much as is expected of Mr. Godot. He has neither solution nor absolution to offer for the waiting. Nevertheless, he and his menial seem indispensable to it. Pozzo and Lucky are referred to as a "diversion" and "reinforcements." In the midst of the cries for help the description sounds preposterous. There can be little doubt Gogo and Didi are mocking truth. On the other hand, considering that



passing the time while waiting is a major problem with the two tramps, Pozzo and Lucky admittedly help towards some solution.

When they leave in the first act Vladimir observes, "That passed the time."

Estragon: It would have passed in any case.

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly.<sup>79</sup>

Upon their second coming Vladimir comments obviously relieved.

Vladimir: We are no longer waiting alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for . . . waiting. All evening we have struggled unassisted. Now it's over. It's already to-morrow.<sup>80</sup>

In the plight in which an absence has engaged them the physical presence of even calamity seems a welcome prop on which to lean and rest. In this light the friendship of Gogo and Didi, in spite of all its drawbacks, becomes priceless.

Just as we cannot grasp Didi's character apart from Gogo's, so Pozzo's character needs to be completed by that of Lucky. Pozzo describes Lucky as a knook and in the French version of the play gives a fuller definition of his creature.

Vladimir: Qu'est-ce que c'est, un knouk?

Pozzo: Vous n'êtes pas d'ici. Etes-vous seulement du siècle? Autrefois on avait des buffoons. Maintenant on a des knouks. Ceux qui peuvent se le permettre.<sup>81</sup>

In the past the position of house buffoons was none too enviable for generally they were regarded as personal property on a level with domestic animals. In Heywood's Dialogue Concerning Witty and Witless it is concluded that "the vast majority of fools live as drudges and are little better than beasts of burden."<sup>82</sup>





Then shall these beasts, witless man and mill-horse, draw on,  
 Both in one yoke. . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 . . . . . sots in many other men's housing  
 Bear water, bear wood, and do in drudgery;  
 In kitchen, coal-house, and 'in nursery:  
 And daily for faults which they cannot refrain,  
 Even like the mill-horse, they be whipped amain.  
 . . . Therefore pleasure conceiving or receiving,  
 The witless and the mill-horse are both as one thing.<sup>83</sup>

Though Lucky's fate resembles that of the witless, it was he who, once, taught Pozzo "beauty, grace, truth of the first water."<sup>84</sup> Such abilities, however, belong entirely to the past and gone for good days. Then Lucky could indeed caper for joy, "dance the farandole, the fling, the brawl, the jig, the fandango, and even the hornpipe."<sup>85</sup> Now the best he can do is perform his miserable dance, which he himself, showing vestiges of former wisdom, calls "the Net." Whatever his state now, however, Lucky still obeys the directions of his showman: "Dance, misery!"<sup>86</sup> "Think, pig!"<sup>87</sup> like a bear or a monkey; or, perhaps, like a puppet-toy wound up to do his little act, whose mechanism is old and fails to satisfy.

Lucky's macaronic utterances resemble fragments of the Dottore's speeches in the commedia dell'arte at least as described by Perrucci:

That which the actor playing this part can have in his memory are various pieces of advice suitable for a counsellor, speeches urging men to devote themselves to study, condemnations of vice, and, above all, long strings of names, dates, and references. The last provide the greatest merriment, particularly when they are given in the form of recapitulations; here they serve at once to display the ostentatious show of his academic doctrine and of his memory.<sup>88</sup>

Lucky's speech takes care of a long string of names and references but both doctrine and memory are in a state of decomposition.



Nothing reflects this better than the form of the speech itself. Broken vases can still be put together, however; fragments of the speech about man wasting and pining, "the skull fading fading fading" . "for reasons unknown" "but time will tell"<sup>89</sup> make more sense than is generally believed. The unbroken fashion in which the speech is delivered is obviously meant for laughs. Nevertheless, the tension it builds up is as alarming as the mere sight of this outlandish creature. If it is true that we can equate Pozzo with Lucky - certainly the second act allows such speculations - and if Didi and Gogo resemble Lucky at all - since in some way he hints at their fate - then Lucky himself is a representative of humanity too, as unwelcome, needless to say, as a skeleton or a skull. From beginning to end Lucky's helplessness is unrelieved. He is a broken down machine beyond any hopes of repair. Perhaps he points out to an end, or beginning of an end, which is mankind's destination.

(iii)

Finally, the setting differentiates between the two sets of clowns. Didi and Gogo are clowns of the road, tramps. As such they are free to do what they want, go where they please. They have no possessions to tie them to the land and the scorn of the social herd relieves them of any obligations to it. Nevertheless, they are not independent. They suffer from a common human weakness, self-insufficiency. They depend on each other





for existence. Their inadequacy is further revealed in their need of this fabulous man: Godot.

The setting - the land of desolation where the mysterious appointment with Godot is never consummated - belongs to Pozzo. The ownership of land and menial gives him the airs of a master but eventually defeats him. Lucky, the servant, drags him down to a fall on the earth he boasts he possesses, but which seems to have him at its mercy while he lies there helpless upon it. Just as in Emerson's well-known "Hamatreya" the earth seems to be singing:

They called me theirs,  
Who so controlled me;  
Yet every one  
Wished to stay, and is gone,  
How am I theirs,  
If they cannot hold me,  
But I hold them?

The fall, revealing the master's insufficiency, is more distressing than the comic failures of the two tramps. In the sight of this crushed man their helplessness looms greater. True, Pozzo may not be Godot; Didi and Gogo for a while think he may be, but one certainly hopes that he isn't. Nevertheless, he is a master-figure and his failings and final fall insidiously undermine the authority of the expected Godot, who is, we are led to believe, a master-figure himself. It would seem that if Pozzo in any way reflects Godot, the two tramps must inevitably fit in the position of Lucky. It is one of the major ironies of the play that Gogo and Didi enjoying some freedom should be looking forward to the yoke that binds Lucky to Pozzo. The master-slave relationship of



the latter two is from beginning to end a big disappointment. One of the most striking features of these two pairs of clowns is the rope that binds Lucky and Pozzo to common misery. The rope emphasizes the chasm between Pozzo and Lucky; but it also indicates the nature of the bond between Didi and Gogo. There may be a certain inevitability in the friendship of the two clowns but it is undoubtedly different from the brutal force that seems to govern the Pozzo-Lucky relationship.

If the setting belongs to Pozzo, it is still all important for Didi and Gogo's friendship, which, in the midst of desolation becomes a necessity. This friendship is, of course, by no means ideal. The two tramps constantly fail each other. Didi refuses Gogo the comfort of listening to his dreams. Gogo recoils from embracing Didi because the latter stinks of garlic. They quarrel and talk of parting ways. They fail to achieve that happiness to which they nevertheless pretend.

Vladimir: You must be happy too, deep down, if you only knew it.  
 Estragon: Happy about what?  
 Vladimir: To be back with me again.  
 Estragon: Would you say so?  
 Vladimir: Say you are, even if it's not true.  
 Estragon: What am I to say?  
 Vladimir: Say, I am happy.  
 Estragon: I am happy.  
 Vladimir: So am I.  
 Estragon: So am I.  
 Vladimir: We are happy.  
 Estragon: We are happy. (Silence.) What do we do now, now that we are happy?  
 Vladimir: Wait for Godot.<sup>90</sup>

This hilarious admission of happiness according to dictation with all its comic repetitions cannot blind us of course to the



fact that happiness is not within the reach of the two tramps. Happiness fails them just as Godot fails them. At the end of the second act we suspect that another day of waiting is in store for them.

Estragon: So long as one knows.  
 Vladimir: One can bide one's time.  
 Estragon: One knows what to expect.  
 Vladimir: No further need to worry.  
 Estragon: Simply wait.  
 Vladimir: We're used to it.<sup>91</sup>

The mere expectation is too much for one man alone. It is important that Gogo and Didi stay together. After all in spite of the petty bickerings, their friendship has its high moments. There is the time when Vladimir fished Estragon out of the river he had thrown himself into; the time when he sings him asleep and covers him with his own coat. It might, perhaps, be worth while to compare Vladimir's fatherly gestures towards Gogo with those of the master-Pozzo towards Lucky. Such differences alone are enough to set off the value of the two tramps' friendship. Vladimir is not presuming after all when he says, "When I think of it . . . all these years . . . but for me . . . where would you be. . . (Decisively.) You'd be nothing more than a little heap of bones at the present minute, no doubt about it."<sup>92</sup> Then there are the pastimes. One cannot play by himself forever. If time must be endured and the waiting accomplished the two tramps are each dependent on the other to do so. Though their loneliness is not cured, it is at least comforted by the presence of someone who has a share in it.





The waiting has been stated as a need. What necessitates it? It seems plausible to say a desire for radical change which Godot is expected to fulfil. Given the circumstances of Gogo and Didi the desire is only natural. In its own peculiar way and in spite of differences waiting is not much unlike the state of revolt Camus' absurdist is said to live in. Living in waiting or living in perpetual revolt implies, in both cases, a campaign in which one is defeated in advance. Both conditions are a means of keeping a vigilant eye on man's situation, both entail an ultimate disappointment, for just as revolt will not bring absolute conquest, so waiting will not bring Godot. Camus chooses open rebellion. The two tramps choose waiting; for waiting too is chosen. Though Didi and Gogo could not be held responsible for the existence or non-existence of Godot, they are responsible for keeping their appointment with him day after day. That also requires some courage. "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment," says Vladimir, "how many people can boast as much?"<sup>93</sup> Enduring is another way of asserting their dignity, a funny sort of dignity, a clown's dignity, human dignity in fact - for by implication they are a portion of mankind, representatives of the have-nots. A similar judgment upon human nature has recently been pronounced by Lawrence Ferlinghetti:

and all us Emmet Kelly clowns  
                                   always making up imaginary scenes  
 with all our masks for faces  
                                   even eat fake Last Suppers  
   at collapsible tables  
 and mocking cross ourselves  
                                   in sawdust crosses



and yet gobble up at last  
                                   to thrive our circus souls  
           the also imaginary wafers of grace.<sup>94</sup>

Beckett's use of two pairs of clowns in Waiting for Godot shows that his view of human nature is more complex than Ferlinghetti's. That view is probably wider and deeper even than the complex metaphor of Waiting for Godot suggests. It is not surprising, nevertheless, that Beckett should be able to project so rich and varied, even if so somber, a view of man by nothing more than his quartet of clown-figures when we reflect upon the rich heritage the tradition of the clown brought to him.

Beckett's management of the clown-figure in which Didi and Gogo participate recognizes and accepts waiting as a condition of life. In "Expecting the Barbarians" the Greek poet Cavafy concludes mercilessly with the extinction of all hope.

Some people arrived from the frontiers,  
 And they said that there are no longer any barbarians.

And now what shall become of us without barbarians?  
 Those people were a kind of solution.<sup>95</sup>

Lawrence Ferlinghetti "perpetually awaiting/a rebirth of wonder,"<sup>96</sup> has voiced his expectations in such a way that we can hardly know whether he is cynical or not - perhaps "Tired of waiting for Godot,"<sup>97</sup> he has merely substituted other dreams for the aspirations which have disappointed him. Beckett does not close his eyes at all to the bleakness of unfulfilled expectancy, or even of self-deluding hope. Instead, he shows how waiting can be managed creatively. The two tramps while embracing it, suggest sports "to drive away the heavy thought of care."<sup>98</sup> Their games are not





intended as consciousness-killers; they are rather anodynes. It is true that Gogo escapes to sleep and oblivion but in his waking he too is fully aware of the situation. Indeed Didi keeps vigil for both of them, and the distance from a reality that can hardly be captured certainly appals him. In moments of lucidity and awareness life falls away to a dream.

Vladimir: Was I sleeping, while the other suffered? Am I sleeping now? To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of to-day? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that, what truth will there be? (Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him.) He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (Pause). Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens). But habit is a great deadener. (He looks again at Estragon.) At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying. He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause). I can't go on! (Pause). What have I said?<sup>99</sup>

This incisive appreciation of the situation cannot come from a sleeping consciousness. We have every sense that the reality apprehended is too much for one to live with. Vladimir knows that he can't go on in full sight of it and is relieved when the Boy arrives: "Off we go again."<sup>100</sup> Diversions are most needed at the peak of tension. Without them the sense of vertigo might lead to a final fall. Clowning is the way to escape the vertigo, and the clowning of Didi and Gogo is essentially creative, even if it never transcends the minimum of human creativity. With a marvelous sense of humour Beckett reproves life but he doesn't



denigrate it. It isn't that he says that as long as we are clowns like Didi and Gogo all is well. What he says is, if we can sustain Didi and Gogo's pitch, we can flatter ourselves we could do much worse.

Having refused to denigrate human nature, he shows us an approximation to dessicated humanity in his other pair of clowns, Lucky and his master Pozzo. Ironically, this pair are the "haves", as Didi and Gogo are the "have-nots". Lucky, bleak fellow that he is, enjoys employment, and Pozzo enjoys possession and mastery but also he suffers corelatively loss. If Didi and Gogo the tramps do full justice to the fully-developed tradition of the clown, Pozzo and Lucky are in fact travesties of the clown-figure.



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19. Waiting for Godot, p. 49.

20. Ibid., 27a.

21. Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form (London, 1953), p. 307.





22. Waiting for Godot, p. 9.
23. Ibid., 44a.
24. Ibid., 41.
25. Ibid., 42a.
26. Welsford, op. cit., 9.
27. Waiting for Godot, pp. 40-40a.
28. Welsford, op. cit., 88.
29. Waiting for Godot, p. 44a.
30. Bergman, op. cit., 293.
31. Waiting for Godot, pp. 33a, 33.
32. Shattuck, op. cit., 38, quoting Guillaume Apollinaire.
33. Waiting for Godot, p. 25a.
34. Ibid., 26.
35. Ibid., 27.
36. Ibid., 48a.
37. Ibid., 31.
38. Ibid., 14a.
39. Payne, op. cit., 26.
40. Waiting for Godot, pp. 27-27a.
41. Ibid., 51-51a.
42. Ibid., 51a.
43. Ibid., 51a.
44. Ibid., 53.
45. Ibid., 54.
46. Ibid., 47.
47. Iona (Archibald) Opie, The Lore and Language of School-children (Oxford, 1959), p. 111.



48. Waiting for Godot, p. 60.
49. Opie, op. cit., 49.
50. Payne, op. cit., 30.
51. Camus, op. cit., 4.
52. Opie, op. cit., 49.
53. Waiting for Godot, pp. 41, 41a, 48a.
54. Ibid., 42.
55. Ibid., 41.
56. Ibid., 12.
57. Opie, op. cit., 48.
58. Waiting for Godot, p. 45.
59. Ibid., 52a.
60. Hoffman, op. cit., 142.
61. Welsford, op. cit., 32.
62. Waiting for Godot, p. 15a.
63. Ibid., 54.
64. Kenner, op. cit., 137, 136.
65. Waiting for Godot, p. 22.
66. Ibid., 20.
67. Ibid., 22.
68. Ibid., 25-26.
69. Ibid., 19.
70. Ibid., 30a.
71. Ibid., 24-24a.
72. Ibid., 22a.
73. Ibid., 23.



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97. Ibid., "Junkman's Obligato," p. 57, ll. 27.
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